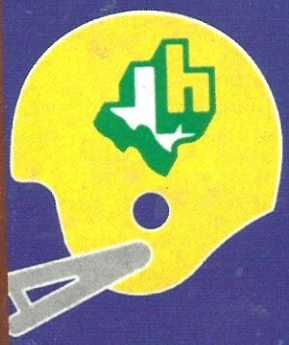

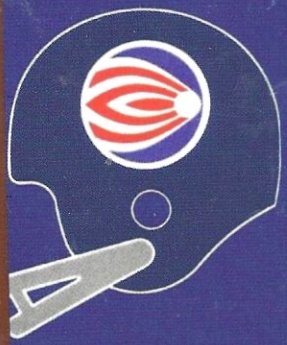

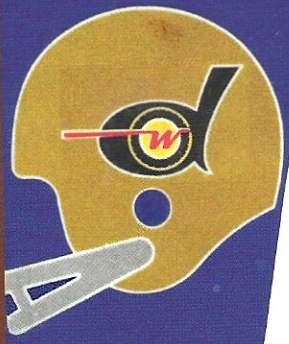

WIFFLE

The Wild, Zany and Sometimes Hilariously True Story of the World Football League

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Introduction

The 1970s was a unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting decade all at the same time. Kent State. Vietnam. All in the Family. Nixon. Agnew. The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Watergate. Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Dean. M*A*S*H. Patty Hearst. Oil embargoes. Recession. Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's home run record and encountering not only cheers but death threats and racist hate mail, as well. Long lines at the gas pumps. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. A president—Gerry Ford—who got shot at not once but two separate times, and who spent the rest of his time tripping over everything in sight. Billy Carter. Saturday Night Live. It was a turbulent decade that saw history-making events, fads and fashions come and go.

A lot of things didn't survive those turbulent 70s. Nixon. Bell bottoms. Leisure suits. Jimmy Hoffa. Lava lamps. Mood rings. Nehru jackets. Disco. Manned flights to the moon.

And the World Football League. Like the decade itself, the WFL was at once unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting. It was a slick, mod, hip alternative to an established entity, the National Football League. It featured the Dickerrod, King Corcoran, bouncing checks, yellow footballs, court orders, magenta and orange uniforms, color-coded pants, Papergate, and singular team nicknames like the Fire, the Bell, the Steamer and the Thunder.

In the end, it turned out to be only a blip on the radar of pro football history. But while it existed, it was one of the wildest, zaniest yet hilariously true stories in the history of sports. It never ceased to amaze and entertain, and it still does to this day. It was perhaps summed up best by Alex Hawkins, color commentator for the WFL's Game of the Week broadcasts on TVS. "The whole thing was so bizarre," the Hawk said, "that you just had to love it."

So settle in and enjoy a 50-yard-line ticket to a real-life Theater of the Absurd.

Part One

1974
WFL SEASON

CHAPTER 1

Upstarts and Startups

Gary Davidson

"The WFL was the best deal I ever did. The timing was just bad."

—GARY DAVIDSON

Gary L. Davidson had a lot of balls.

Sure, he had red, white and blue basketballs, footballs of all designs and colors, and he even threw in a red or bright blue hockey puck for good measure.

But Gary Davidson also had a lot of balls. As in onions. Cajones. Stones. Because from the mid-60s to the mid-70s, he made it his personal goal to take on, and become a thorn in the side of, the established leagues of three of the four major sports in North America. He presided over what could best be described as a parallel sports universe, a sort of "Bizarro World" of sports. Not only that, he also lived to tell about it.

Davidson's leagues, like rock stars, lived fast and died young. They left creditors and historians to sort through all the bad checks, bad ideas, ridiculous innovations and ridiculous business practices that they left behind. It's no wonder that one of the first checks ever written to the WHA, the initiation fee for a franchise called the Miami Screaming Eagles, bounced.

But perhaps the most ridiculous thing about Gary Davidson and his rebel leagues was that in many ways, they might not have been that ridiculous after all.

"Walter O'Malley and Horace Stoneham are viewed as being extremely important in the evolution of modern pro sports," said Max Muhleman, who worked in the WFL front office. "What they did was induce other owners to view the sporting landscape in much larger terms. I can see a lot of that in what Gary Davidson did."

"Gary Davidson," noted *Sports Illustrated* in 1975 "has been one of the most influential figures in the history of professional sport." Two years later, an editorial in *The Sporting News* read, "What man, more than any other, has had the greatest impact on professional sports in America? You'd have to say Gary Davidson . . ."

Davidson and some fellow attorney pals were responsible for freeing athletes in the established NHL, NFL and NBA from their very restrictive contracts. In the NBA alone, the average player's salary quadrupled, to $109,000, during the ABA's nine-year life span.

Ted Turner colorized old movies. Gary Davidson colorized old sports leagues. This was the man who was the first president of the ABA, a cofounder of the WHA and the founder and first commissioner of the WFL. Davidson designed his rebel leagues to be the hip, cool, mod alternative to the existing and what he and his buddies considered the square professional sports Establishment. In the Davidson universe, the NBA, NHL and NFL made up the professional sports Establishment.

To fight the Establishment, Davidson and his leagues placed franchises in cities that were not previously considered "major league," places such as Winnipeg, Orlando, San Antonio, Charlotte, Edmonton and Indianapolis.

"A lot of new cities that had never had teams proved they could carry teams," said Tim Grandi, the former associate general counsel for the WFL, ""He wasn't Moses, but he did take control of professional sports away from a clique of owners and opened it up to more people and more cities."

"I was probably responsible for more benefits to the players, than Pete Rozelle or any other commissioner," Davidson said quietly years later, "but I don't think that that will come up much anymore."

Davidson's story is interesting to say the least. Raised by a divorced mother, he worked his way through his first year of UCLA Law School by picking up freshly murdered corpses at the coroner's office while on the night shift of an L.A. mortuary. Not long after graduation, having already established himself as a tax and

finance attorney in Orange County, Davidson got in on the ground floor of something called the American Basketball Association.

While Davidson was initially credited with being a founder of the ABA, in reality he actually wasn't. Dennis Murphy was at the forefront of the league, and he stated that Davidson came in after he and John McShane had actually gotten the ball rolling, so to speak. "I talked to people," Murphy said in *Loose Balls*, by Terry Pluto, "they talked to other people, and soon Roland Speth, Larry Shields, Art Kim, Gary Davidson and Don Regan became involved." Davidson admitted that he really wasn't a founder of the league in his book, *Breaking the Game Wide Open*, and Murphy confirmed that in *Loose Balls*. "Gary's real role was with the people putting together the Dallas franchise," Murphy said.

Like he would do during his involvement with the WHA and the WFL, Davidson gave himself a franchise—in the case of the ABA it was Dallas—although he knew he didn't have the capital to run it. He then turned around—as he would in the WHA and WFL—and sold the rights to the franchise to the men who became the actual owners. But Davidson wasn't satisfied with just making a few bucks in the deal.

"Gary wanted to stay active in the league," said Murphy in *Loose Balls*, "and he came up with the idea that George Mikan would be commissioner of the ABA, but that he'd be president. George would be in charge of everyone while Gary would be president of just the owners. I liked Gary and I helped him get elected, but he and Mikan never got along."

Their differences got to the point, Terry Pluto stated in *Loose Balls*, where Mikan threatened to suspend Davidson and Davidson threatened to suspend Mikan. It was obvious the two men got along about as well as oil and water, and because Mikan was the commissioner and was just what the ABA needed, the ABA began to realize it didn't need Davidson.

"Gary Davidson really made his reputation in the World Football League," said Lee Meade, the ABA's first public relations man, in *Loose Balls*, "He was a major player there. But in the ABA, he just wasn't important, even if he was the first president. He got that position before Mikan became commissioner. After George took over, he didn't want Gary around."

Dick Tinkham, owner of the Indiana team, said in *Loose Balls*, "Gary Davidson appeared at one of the early league meetings. First he wanted to be commissioner. Then he ended up being president somehow. None of us (the owners) could figure out why we had to listen to Gary Davidson. Who was he?"

Finally, at a league meeting, Joe Geary, one of the principal owners of the Dallas team, asked Tinkham if Davidson owned a piece of the Indiana franchise. Told that he didn't, Geary went around to each owner and quietly asked them the same thing. When he discovered that Davidson didn't own a team or even a piece of one, Geary called for a recess and asked Davidson to step outside. "That," said Tinkham in *Loose Balls*, "was the last any of us saw of him in the ABA."

Although given the heave-ho from the ABA, Davidson had been bitten by the bug. He had liked the idea of being in on the start of a new endeavor. "The ABA gave us an experience and credibility," said Davidson, "and that's an important factor when you are starting up a league." He knew that with the right people, he could do something like that himself. So Davidson set his sights on another target—the National Hockey League.

In 1971, the NHL had only 12 franchises, having expanded from the original six only four years before. Davidson knew there had to be untapped markets out there that could support a hockey team. And he knew he and some of his buddies would be just the men to tap into those markets.

One of his buddies he knew he had to contact was Dennis Murphy, who had founded the ABA. Murphy was the patron saint of creating new sports leagues. Veteran basketball official John Vanak said in *Loose Balls*, "If they ever put any kind of league on the moon, Dennis Murphy will probably start it."

Murphy was a former marketing executive and also the former mayor of Buena Park, California. He had been blessed with a winning smile and a world of energy.

"Dennis Murphy would go into a town," said Davidson, "and call an accountant or call a lawyer, and ask if he had any clients who were interested in professional sports. He wasn't saying, 'Do you have any interest in a vinyl-dye factory?' Within two days he would have gotten enough leads for us to have someone to talk to. We would then come in, and the line would be, 'Would you rather be known as the owner of the Detroit Wheels or as a manufacturer of brassieres?'"

"Back then there were guys who had made millions making widgets in Omaha, but the only guys who knew them were maybe their bankers and the guys at the country club," said Tim Grandi, who worked with Davidson in the WHA and then followed him to the Wiffle. "But with a sports franchise, they recognized an opportunity to be known in L.A. or Detroit. Maybe 90 percent of them were flakes, but . . ."

So Davidson enlisted the help of Murphy and his friend and law partner, Don Regan, and started looking for investors. Together the trio approached and worked their magic on the egos of small-town but big-money businessmen throughout the continent, men who simply couldn't resist owning their own pro team.

The whole point was to make money, and Davidson knew that to make money you had to make headlines, and for this task Gary Davidson was perfectly suited. He was a smooth-as-glass pitchman in a new era of sound bites and video clips.

"You'd created this story, this image, this mirage, but all of a sudden you begin to have value," recalled Davidson. He was referring to a mounted replica of the famous check for $1,000,000 made out to Bobby Hull from WHA Properties, Ltd., dated June 27th, 1972. "We weren't sure Bobby could even play," said Davidson. "But that check created so much publicity around the world that even though Winnipeg hadn't played a single game that franchise had value."

The trio began to feel like kings or conquering heroes. "Pick a city you had never been to before," said Regan. "Say Quebec City. We flew into Quebec City during the WHA days. We had the mayor, the governor, and the biggest businessmen in town. . . . We'd fly in, they'd run a red carpet out to us, they'd drive us away in Rolls-Royces, they'd treat us like we were the potentates of the world."

Davidson had never even seen a hockey game until he co-founded the World Hockey Association in 1971. Would that stop him, you might ask? Not on your life! Neither did not knowing a thing about the game.

Before the league began play in '72, three potential franchise owners visited California with the idea of getting better acquainted with Davidson and Dennis Murphy by attending a Los Angeles Kings game with them.

"I'll never forget," said Murphy. "We're all sitting there in a row, the game is about to start, and the linesman goes to center ice and is about to drop the puck when Gary says, 'What are they doing?'"

According to Murphy, Wild Bill Hunter, the prospective owner of the Alberta Oilers, looked at Murphy and barked, "Who the hell is this guy?"

"Later," said Murphy, "Gary would fall asleep during the game. But in fairness to him, he never purported to know anything about hockey."

Davidson and Hunter would have another exchange when Davidson proposed that the new league use a less-than-subtle fire-engine-red puck. That idea was angrily shot down by Hunter. "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen," Hunter said when first approached about the proposed scarlet disc. "Our players will never be able to see that puck."

Why not? Davidson asked.

"Because," answered Wild Bill, "they'll be looking for a *black* one."

Hunter would also reject Davidson's idea of eliminating the center red line in order to speed up the game.

"I was impressed with them only as promoters," said Hunter, "They knew nothing about hockey. Absolutely zero."

But to challenge the NHL, they needed each other. The money men needed the promoters and the promoters needed the money men. The NHL's dominance of the hockey world had never been threatened. But it was about to be. On June 10th, 1971, Davidson filed the WHA's articles of incorporation, and he and Murphy announced that there was a new league in town, and that the hockey universe was not going to be big enough for two separate leagues. The WHA's philosophy that had been concocted by Davidson and Murphy was incredibly simple. They wanted to establish themselves in cities that had previously been shunned by the NHL—many of which were Canadian—and also to set up bases in North America's biggest media centers, with the sole purpose of competing head-to-head with the NHL.

So, on November 1st, 1971, Davidson and Murphy announced the new league's 10 charter cities, one of which—San Francisco—the duo had claimed for themselves like it was their birthright. Not long after, in what had become their modus operandi, Davidson and Murphy then peddled the 'Frisco franchise off to some investors in Quebec City.

In another display of chutzpah, Davidson and Murphy named two of the league's top awards, for the Most Valuable Player and the Top Defenseman, after themselves.

Davidson also named himself president of the new league, and immediately began to shake things up. He realized that the average NHL salary in 1972 was $25,000, the lowest of the four major sports. At the same time, the players were bound by the reserve clause, a clause in every player's contract that automatically extended a player's contract by one year when it expired, tying them to their team for the life of their career. In October of 1972, Davidson announced that his new league would not use the reserve clause, stating that "The reserve clause won't stand up to the scrutiny of . . . players, players associations, the United States Congress, the public and the Supreme Court."

Davidson and the WHA owners promised much higher salaries than the NHL offered, and by the time that league play began, it had lured 67 former NHL players to its league, including big-name stars like Bernie Parent, Gerry Cheevers, Derek Sanderson, J. C. Tremblay and Ted Green. But the biggest name signed was former Chicago Blackhawks star Bobby Hull, who agreed to a 10-year, $2.7 million contract with the Winnipeg Jets, the largest in hockey history at the time, and one that gave the league instant credibility.

The NHL tried to block several of the defections, but in November 1972, a Philadelphia district court placed an injunction against the NHL, preventing it from enforcing the reserve clause and freeing all players the NHL had placed restraining orders against, including Hull, to play with their WHA clubs. The decision effectively ended the NHL's monopoly on major league professional hockey talent.

"Certainly, whether Gary intended it or not," said Tim Grandi, "Players acquired new freedoms and prosperity that didn't previously exist."

At least he didn't say "Worsley . . . Worsley Gump."

When the WHA named Camille Henry, a former star with the New York Rangers, to be coach of its New York Raiders, Davidson made the announcement at a press conference in Manhattan. He announced, "I'd like to welcome Henry Camille. . . ." As the gathering laughed loudly, Davidson's face turned as red as a center ice line. "No, no," he stammered, quickly trying to correct his mistake. "I mean . . . *Hank*. Hank Camille!"

Despite the fact that the league was plagued with problems right from the start, and many teams often found themselves in financial difficulty, the WHA made it through its inaugural season. Although he continued to feud with Bill Hunter, who constantly reminded Davidson that he knew nothing about hockey and should leave the league decisions to someone who did—namely him—Davidson was proud of what he had accomplished with the WHA. He saw the WHA as being better than the ABA's beginning. But for Davidson, it was time to move on. He had bigger fish to fry.

So, in 1973, Davidson resigned from his position as president of the WHA and turned his attention to his latest mission, that of taking on the biggest fish in the lake—the National Football League.

"We were young enough and naive enough that we didn't know there were limits," said Regan, "that the world has finite boundaries."

Davidson realized that like the NBA and NHL, the NFL, since the merger with the rival AFL in 1970, had become a monopoly and that the players were basically at the mercy of the owners. He saw that the way professional sports were run as businesses did not follow basic legal principles and concepts. He knew that he had a good legal foot to stand on if he expected to battle the NFL.

Davidson then called on some of his WHA buddies and other pals to start up what would eventually become the World Football league. At a press conference held in Chicago in October of 1973, Davidson announced his plans of conquest and introduced his partners, a group of men he called the "founding fathers." "Crazy Little Ship of Fools," was more like it. Most of them were Davidson's pals from the ABA or WHA, or just tennis partners and hangers on.

In hindsight, they were certainly not substantial enough to take on the National Football League (In fact, they might not have been ready for the Atlantic Coast Football League!). Back in 1960, skeptics had called Lamar Hunt and his partners in the American Football League the "Foolish Club," but Davidson's group took that moniker to a whole new level. There's a fine line between foolish and foolhardy.

This bunch originally included a former hockey prospect named Howard Baldwin; R. Steve Arnold, a player agent and a WHA associate of Davidson's; Ken Bogdanoff, an unemployed lifeguard and ticket-taker for the Philadelphia Flyers; and Bud Hucul, a Detroit hospital employee. It was painfully obvious that Lamar Hunt, Bud Adams, and Ralph Wilson were not walking through that WFL door.

Donald Regan admitted, "If we waited for 12 Lamar Hunts to come along, we wouldn't be ready for the 1985 season. They pop up along the way."

Despite the skeptics and critics, Davidson would pour his heart and soul into the WFL, and believed that it was better organized and better financed than either the ABA or WHA. But the timing of the formation of the league would ultimately prove to be part of its downfall. The economy in 1973 and '74 was in awful shape. Interest rates were at record highs. There were oil embargoes and long lines at gas stations. The Dow Jones industrial average was in free fall, a decline that would continue through 1973 and into '74. The country was embroiled in the Watergate scandal. A new league would need new owners, and there weren't that many around during those dark years of the 1970s. "The

economic timing was terrible," admitted Davidson, "1974 was a disastrous year in the world from a political side, the president resigned. Oil embargoes. The prime rate went to 15%. The Dow Jones dropped to 550. The real estate market crashed and guys were filing bankruptcy left and right. It was a hard time to try to go out and raise venture capital. The WFL was the best deal I ever did. The timing was just bad."

"Everybody knew before the WFL started that there would be severe problems and that some operations might not make it," said Davidson at the time, "What hurt most is the state of the economy. Nobody knew the inflation would go this far and what it would do to purchasing power. Television revenue is less than what we expected. It has averaged about $75,000 per team and we thought it would be double that.

"We did so many things right and we had a real opportunity," Davidson continued, "but we were killed by things beyond our control."

The Sports Illustrated Cover Curse in Reverse

Poor timing and bad luck seemed to dog the WFL during its entire existence. For example, the April 15th, 1974 edition of *Sports Illustrated* was supposed to have Commissioner Gary Davidson along with recent signees Calvin Hill and Ted Kwalick on its cover. This could have been a real shot in the arm for the league, and given it some positive publicity just when they needed it. Unfortunately, that same week, Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth's home run record and *SI* dumped the WFL cover for one featuring Hammerin' Hank.

While it's true that the league did suffer at the hands of outside forces, it would ultimately do itself in with bad business practices, poor organization, terrible decisions, and goofy ideas that the sports fan of the '70s wasn't ready to accept.

Davidson would ultimately be regarded by some as a visionary, while others saw him as a fly-by-night shyster who was just in it for the bread. Some, like Ed Willes, author of *The Rebel League*, said that while Davidson's leagues "didn't live as long as a good dog," he then mentioned his name in the same sentence as people like Pete Rozelle, Marvin Miller and Roone Arledge.

But unlike Rozelle, Miller and Arledge, Davidson has been mostly forgotten. Like Evel Knievel he was nothing more than a colorful streak across the 1970s sky. But like Knievel at the Snake River Canyon, he ultimately fell short of his goal.

Whatever one thought of the man, he definitely made the sports landscape fun and interesting during the late 60s and mid 70s. Thanks to the young lawyer from California, sports underwent what Steve Rushin wrote in *Sports Illustrated* a "Davidsonic" boom. Yet, in the 21st century, the name Gary Davidson is unknown to many average sports fans.

One can make the argument that Gary Davidson was one of the most influential figures in the history of professional sport.

"Honestly, I probably created as much work for players, lawyers and agents as anyone in the last thirty years, but I don't think about my legacy or what it means," said Davidson, "There are a lot easier ways to make money than starting up a league. We made more money off real-estate deals and practicing law than starting up leagues. But there's an excitement about sports that's hard to deny. The NHL tried to litigate us out of business, and it always seemed like we were facing an intriguing challenge. We had a lot of fun."

The World Football league was a lot of things, but mostly it was a lot of fun and made for a lot of interesting stories. There's never been another league quite like it, and it's doubtful we will ever see its like again. That, in good ways and bad, you can owe to Gary L. Davidson.

CHAPTER 2

"The Whole Thing was So Bizarre"

The Wiffle, 1974

"This was easily the most fascinating league ever spawned."

—ALEX HAWKINS, color commentator on TVS

Davidson's original plan called for the league to begin play in 1975. But when rumors of another upstart league surfaced, along with reports of the possibility of a players' strike in the NFL, Davidson figured he should strike when the iron was hot. He decided to move up the new league's planned debut to the summer of 1974, rather than '75.

Davidson was able to find backers, although he would finally have to admit, "We made mistakes in ownership selection. We let people come into the league because of the time frame that we might have held back on if we had decided to start play in 1975 instead of 1974."

With his timetable moved up, Davidson hurriedly tried to formulate the league. The old saying 'Haste makes waste' was certainly true about the WFL. Davidson latched on to anyone who had two nickels to rub together, and this led to some questionable decisions as far as owners and ownership groups were concerned.

In any event, in October of 1973, Davidson called on some of his WHA buddies and other pals and, using the same formula he used with the WHA, started up what would eventually become the World Football League. Davidson named himself commissioner and then named his buddy Donald Regan secretary and general counsel.

Howard Baldwin, who owned the New England Whalers of the WHA, was granted a WFL franchise for Boston. Nick Mileti, who ran the WHA's Cleveland Crusaders, wanted a team for Tampa, Florida, but when word got out that the NFL was considering that area for expansion, Mileti settled on a Chicago franchise. John Bassett, another Davidson pal from the WHA, was given a franchise for Toronto, Canada.

Ben Hatskin, who had helped the WHA sign Bobby Hull for his Winnipeg team, was offered a franchise for Hawaii. Although present at several early league meetings, Hatskin would ultimately pass on the WFL. His place in Hawaii would be taken by Danny Rogers, licensing director for the WHA, who was merely a caretaker until the real money men came along. Bill Putnam was another Davidson acquaintance who had been the former owner of the Philadelphia Flyers and at the time was part owner of both the Atlanta Hawks and Atlanta Flames. Davidson invited him in and told him to pick a territory. Putnam chose Birmingham, Alabama.

Steve Arnold, another member of Davidson's inner circle and a special advisor for the WHA, hopped on board with his sights set on Tokyo. But because of time and logistic limitations, Arnold finally had to settle on Memphis, Tennessee. Larry Hatfield, a neighbor of Davidson's in Newport Beach, California, had been swayed by Davidson's talk of the new league over cocktails and between tennis matches. He was given rights to an Anaheim franchise. Another Davidson crony, Chuck Rohe, had told the commissioner that he could bring in some people to run a club in Florida.

Not the "Pilgrims?"

When news of the formation of the WFL began to spread, rumors surfaced almost daily about possible owners and investors. There was talk that Frank Sinatra and Spiro Agnew were interested

in placing a team in Chicago, rumors that started when it was discovered that Davidson, Sinatra and Agnew happened to be staying at the same hotel at the same time (and rumors certainly not denied by Davidson, who figured at the time that any publicity was good publicity). The most intriguing story came out of California, when rumor spread that legendary actor John Wayne, the "Duke" himself, was interested in owning a team that would play in Anaheim. The name of the team? Why, the "Dukes" of course.

Davidson spoke about adding future teams in Mexico City, London, Rome, Dusseldorf, Germany, and both Tokyo and Osaka, Japan. He also boasted of the league having a European Division within the next few years.

When asked about how obvious travel problems to such places as England and Japan would be resolved, Davidson replied that he saw these extended road trips as no obstacle whatsoever. This claim would later come back to haunt him. Skeptics would sarcastically point out that league franchises could hardly afford to send their teams to exotic places such as Shreveport, Louisiana, and Charlotte, North Carolina, much less Europe or the Orient.

But late in 1973 and early in '74, Davidson was still crowing long and loud, trumpeting the virtues and possibilities of his new venture.

"We're going to try to loosen everybody up a little with a bright new look to the sport," boasted Davidson. He then announced a number of rules changes to help add offense to the game, including kickoffs from the 35-yard line instead of the 40, use of the old 2-point conversion, and mandatory punt returns instead of a fair catch.

At the time, the NFL was still a three-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust league. From 1970, the first year of the merger, to 1973, the NFL boasted just two 3,000-yard passers, and 22 1,000-yard rushers. In 1972 alone, for example, the NFL had no 3,000-yard passers and 10 running backs who went over 1,000 yards. It was still a very ground-based league. So, when the WFL promised a more wide-open game, the NFL quickly took notice. Not long after the WFL announced its rules changes, the older league proclaimed they were adopting significant rules changes, many of them similar and even identical to the WFL's changes.

League officials estimated the projected costs of running a WFL team would total $2.135 million. Transportation costs, Davidson said, would be divided among league members.

When asked where players to stock the league would come from, Davidson retorted, "There's no shortage. There are 7,000 in colleges. We would also take some from the semi-pros, some from the Canadian League, some who had been cut, and some who played out their options in the NFL."

Davidson quickly revealed his ingenuity in recruiting players. In the winter of '73, he and Steve Arnold wanted to tell 500 or so NFL players about the new league. The problem was, they didn't know the players' addresses. Did that stop Davidson? Not on your life. He concocted a simple, yet brilliant, scheme. They had the recruiting letters inserted in plain white envelopes, stamped each one "Please Forward," and mailed them to the NFL offices in New York. The offices, in their efficiency, quickly forwarded them to the players. About 250 of the players wrote back to Davidson expressing their interest in the WFL.

At the time, in those pre-free agency days, the NFL players welcomed a competing league, hoping the league's stagnant salaries would rise. "We want to go from the outhouse to the penthouse," said a Giant player who wished to remain anonymous.

Developments like this buoyed Davidson's confidence.

"We are far better off than the American Football League when it started," the young lawyer asserted.

But despite Davidson's chutzpah, the NFL brass was skeptical this new league could even wage war, much less win it, and that pessimistic view was not limited to the NFL. Oddsmaker Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder didn't think the WFL would last the year, calling the league "semi-pro."

"I'll be glad to take his money," Davidson replied.

Unfortunately, in several months, Davidson would be glad to take *anybody's* money. And many of the league's players would be even less than "semi"-pros.

On January 14th, 1974, in Los Angeles, the WFL began its first two-day organizational meeting and announced that eleven franchises were preparing to play beginning in July. An additional franchise would be awarded before the league's first draft on the 22nd.

Birmingham, Memphis, an undetermined city in Florida, Boston, Toronto, New York, Anaheim, Philadelphia, Honolulu, Chicago and Washington, DC were the eleven cities represented at the meeting. A twelfth and last franchise would be chosen from several possible cities, including Detroit and Portland.

A team in Mexico City, Mexico was planned but was said to be a year away.

The new league would also play under Davidson's revised rules, rules aimed at livening up the game and

increasing offense. Many of them would be adopted by the older league:

- Touchdowns would be worth 7 points, instead of 6.
- Conversions would be called "Action Points" and could only be scored by a run or pass play.

Lights, Camera . . . Action!

One of the very few things the Wiffle did right was institute the "action point." The league decided that instead of the old dull and boring kicked extra point, their teams would accomplish the point after touchdown by having to run or pass. This action point, as the league called it, was the brainchild of William Finneran of MIT, who arrived at the Wiffle offices with a dossier full of equations that showed why the league needed to forego the usual PAT. "You should have seen all the figures he had on extra points," said Davidson, "It was impressive, and we knew the other league would not copy what we were going to do." What the Wiffle did was to make it mandatory for their teams to run or pass from the two-and-a-half yard line for an extra point after touchdowns. Now how did they come up with the two-and-a-half yard line? Well, we told you Finneran's dossier had a lot of facts in it, and they showed that the odds on running or passing the ball into the end zone from the 2-yard line were 50-50, but if you moved the ball back to the three, the chances were just one in three. "So," Davidson said, "we decided to split the difference." The idea met with some hesitation at first. "I was opposed to it at first," said Henry Lee Parker, the Wiffle's director of football operations, "To me, a touchdown was a touchdown, and I didn't want anybody changing it. But the more I looked at it, the more I liked it. A point-after kick is more or less a ho-hum kind of thing. Now I'm convinced it can be the most exciting thing in the game." Birmingham coach Jack Gotta added, "The new rule de-emphasizes the kicking game and puts more offense in the game. We'll continue to add offense to the game rather than the kickers." The "action point" became one of the Wiffle's best and most welcomed ideas. It made the difference in many of the league's games, and made many more dramatic, including the World Bowl, which Birmingham won 22-21—on a successful action point.

- Kickoffs would be from the 30-yard line instead of the 40. Before 1974, NFL teams kicked off from the 40; starting in 1974, the NFL moved its kickoffs back to the 35.
- Bump-and-run pass coverage was outlawed once a receiver was 3 yards beyond the line of scrimmage. The NFL would adopt this rule in 1978, with a 5-yard bump zone.
- The goalposts were placed at the back of the end zone. The NFL had its goalposts at the goal line from 1933 through 1973, but starting with the 1974 season, the NFL also moved its posts to the back of the end zone.
- Missed field goals were returned to the line of scrimmage or the 20-yard line, whichever was farther from the goal line. The NFL also adopted this rule for its 1974 season.
- A player in motion was allowed to move toward the line of scrimmage before the snap, as long as he was behind the line of scrimmage at the snap.
- Punt returners were prohibited from using the fair catch, although the covering team could not come within 5 yards of the kick returner until he caught the ball.
- Penalties for offensive holding and ineligible receiver downfield were 10 yards, instead of 15. The NFL made this rule change in 1977.
- The WFL's original overtime system was like nothing used in any form of American football before or since; it was more similar to the system long used in international soccer. Overtime in the regular season was one fixed 15-minute period, divided into two halves of 7½ minutes, each starting with a kickoff by one of the teams. The complete overtime was always played; there was no "sudden death" feature. In 1975, the WFL changed its overtime to the 15-minute sudden-death period, which the NFL adopted in 1974 and still uses today.
- In 1974 the WFL's 1974 schedule called for 20 regular-season games and no pre-season games.
- The WFL copied the blueprint of the CFL by starting their regular season in July of 1974.
- While NFL games were traditionally played on Sundays with another game on Monday night, the WFL's 1974 schedule called for Wednesday night football (with a Thursday night national TV game). The featured Thursday night game was later adopted as "Thursday Night Football" by the NFL in 2006.

It was obvious that the WFL was trying to legislate kicking out of the game. By instituting the action

point, moving the goalposts, and ruling that missed field goals be returned to the line of scrimmage and not the 20-yard line, the WFL honchos were hoping to add more touchdowns, and therefore more action, and at the same time minimize the significance of kickers in the game, which had grown significantly in recent years. The kicking game had become such a big part of the NFL game that a position player had not finished in the Top Ten in scoring since 1969. The WFL's plan worked—all of the top ten scorers in the WFL in 1974 were position players, not a kicker to be found in the bunch.

Within weeks of the WFL announcing its rules and rule changes for the upcoming season, the NFL decided that some of the changes sounded pretty good and adopted them as well!

"We had no idea they would react so quickly," said Davidson, "They kinda took some of the wind out of our sails by adopting some of those rules."

The NFL's rules changes seemed to curtail the preponderance of field goals in their games as well. In 1973, 10 kickers finished with 100 points or more. In 1974, none did.

The 20-game schedule, which the league wanted to end by Thanksgiving and would turn out to be one of their dumber ideas, meant that each team would have to play three games in a 10-day span during the Labor Day holiday season. A majority of the players voiced the same opinion: "Who the hell drew up this schedule?"

The answer was Don Andersen, the Wiffle's Vice President for Public Relations. "We decided we wanted our season ended before Thanksgiving," explained Andersen, "and to do it required bunching up some games somewhere along the line."

The 20-game schedule, and specifically the 3-games-in-10-days stretch, would take its toll on the players physically and mentally. Some talked of the schedule not allowing enough time for wounds to heal, while others complained that the schedule did not allow for proper preparation for the next opponent. Whatever the reason, it was not one of the WFL's brightest moments.

The WHAT Kinda Rod?

In 1974, the WFL unleashed something called the Dickerrod on the nation's football fans. The purpose of this contraption was to replace the first down chains that were in use at every level of football. The Dickerrod was invented and patented by a fellow by the name of George Dicker of Orange County, California. He invented it, the WFL installed it, Alex Karras tried to explain it, and TV made a joke of it. It was a device two and a half yards, or 90 inches, long. If the ball was placed on the 23 yard line, a marker would be placed 2 yards up the rod at the 25 yard line. Then, in order to measure whether a first down had been attained, the Dickerrod would be laid down at the 35 yard line. The spot of the ball would then be measured against the marker on the rod, which would now be at the 33 yard line, 2 yards away from the 35 yard line. Get it? Neither did anyone else. The Dickerrod was intended to be a more convenient alternative to the chain and poles currently in use, since a full chain crew was not needed, and measurements could be conducted by one person instead of the typical three. "It was supposed to speed everything up," said John McDonough, supervisor of WFL officials, "What it did was slow everything down. It took more people to use it." Twice the rod broke, fortunately for the officials *after* the measurement had been taken. But the embarrassed officials had to resort to the old stand-by, the chain and poles. "I just don't know what would have happened if the thing broke during actual measurement. I don't know what we would have done in that case," McDonough went on, sounding just like a man who didn't want to think about what they would have done. The thing turned out to be too mechanical, with breakdowns being too likely. The slide wouldn't slide when it was supposed to slide. Or it would slide when it wasn't supposed to slide. McDonough worried that mud, rain, or freezing temperatures could foul it up. "It would be like owning a $10,000 car and a 50-cent part throws it out of operation," said McDonough. WFL headquarters seemed just as puzzled about the contraption as anyone else. A secretary in the league office who answered the phone couldn't tell callers what it was. When she referred the caller to someone else, they could only ask, "The what kinda rod?" The device never caught on, and George Dicker grew weary of his brainchild being maligned on national TV and told the league to stop abusing his product. The WFL dumped the idea after the '74 season. The three-man chain crew remained the standard. As Bob Chick, Sports Editor for the *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* wrote in July of 1975, "The World Football League won't have the Dickerrod to kick around anymore."

Besides the new rules, the Wiffle also planned to use a football that was unique from the traditional NFL ball. They wanted something that would be associated with just the WFL, and be something they could call their own.

"When we designed the football, we asked all the manufacturers, Spaulding, Rawlings, Wilson, to come up with some designs," recalled Davidson, "I had a bag of footballs in my office that had balls that were long and skinny, so you could throw them a long way but were harder to catch. And balls that were short and fat, so you could run well with them but couldn't throw as far. We had balls with laces on all sides so when the center snapped the ball you always had the laces right there in your hand. We tried every color, and had the quarterbacks try throwing them, and ended up with the golden ball with the orange stripes."

"I thought it was kind of corny," said Florida running back Tommy Reamon, "But then we got used to it and it became ours. It was something that we created, we created it at birth. I was a part of that."

"Baby-poop yellow with an orange stripe," was how Chicago quarterback Virgil Carter described it, "That ball was a little wider in the middle, not much, a bit different. I was out in Southern California when the league was forming and I would stop by Gary Davidson's office and he'd give me balls to go out and throw. One of the balls had laces down all four sides, and it was like throwing a shot put."

"The NFL ball was easier to pass," recalled Birmingham quarterback George Mira, "The NFL ball wasn't quite as big and round. The WFL ball was a little shorter, I think it was easier to punt than throw. Then you had the orange stripe around the ball and when that ball got wet it was slick the yellow paint wore off it and you'd get it all over your hands and uniform. After a while the yellow and orange wore off to make it dull and it was tough to see at night. I thought it was a new league, something different, hell I was all in favor of it. Why have the same thing as the NFL. Make your own recognition, get your own stuff going."

"The color was different," said running back J. J. Jennings of Memphis, "In fact, I tried to make spaghetti sauce the other night and it came out looking like the WFL football. It didn't affect me. Those orange stripes, to me it was just a football, it was just like anything, you could get used to it after awhile. I'm not a quarterback so I don't know anything about strings or the thickness of the ball. When you carry it you gotta hold on to it. The league tried to design new things. I never had a problem with the football. I thought it was easier to see at night. I caught 40 or 50 passes, and I think the fans thought it was easier to see as well."

"I hated it at first, it was brown and orange," recalled Florida quarterback Bob Davis, "but actually, I loved that ball. I have large palms but very short fingers, and when a ball gets wet I throw a lot of wounded ducks. I used to enjoy the colder weather because I could grip the ball better, and then throw a better pass. The WFL ball was thinner, a bit longer, and I thought it was easier to see at night. I didn't like the color much."

"The first time we saw that ball was in our first pregame warm-ups" said wide receiver Tim Delaney of The Hawaiians, "It was fun to throw and catch, and it appealed to the fans. But on a hot, muggy night in Orlando [against the Blazers] . . . that yellow dye came off on our forearms and hands. We looked jaundiced."

"Initially it was a booger," said Detroit quarterback Bubba Wyche, "I think the focus was to have some excitement for the fans. The gimmick was that the ball was orange in color. It was a Spaulding ball, so the football wasn't any different, it was just a different color.

"The first time we ever saw this new football, believe it or not, was on game day in Memphis against the Southmen. The trainer pitched me a ball, on the field, and I picked it up and started warming up with it. I look down at my hands and this dye was all over my hands. It had come off the football. That's how new this football was. Not only was it new for the fans in the stands, but it was new to the players on the field who were seeing it for the first time as well. Apparently, the dye was so fresh on the balls it was coming off and everybody's hands were orange. We were all running around with orange hands."

"Gold with orange stripes," recalled New York head coach Babe Parilli, "I liked it. The ABA had their ball, we had ours. That was a good idea, a good marketing tool. Kids would love to have a ball like that. You could really see it well when it was thrown."

"It was weird," said Chicago running back Mark Kellar, "That yellow ball was different, but it carried like anything else. I think they felt the ball would attract some light and make it easier to see at night."

"It was wild," offered wide receiver Vince Papale of Philadelphia, "That gold would come off on your hands. Your hands would be gold. It was something different, you know, and it had that Gary Davidson signature on there. It was perfect."

The WFL franchises, meanwhile, seemed to be playing some weird version of the old kids' game Musical Chairs in the early stages of the league's existence.

See if you can follow all this . . .

Memphis became Houston
Toronto became Memphis
Boston became New York
New York became Portland
Florida became Jacksonville
Washington became Virginia, then became Florida

Got all that? The world of the WFL could be a confusing place at times.

The WFL held the first phase of its college draft on January 22nd. To show you how hodge-podge the beginnings of the WFL were, at the time of the draft, only four of the teams had head coaches, only two had GMs, and only one had a personnel director.

That's why the draft results were so hit-and-miss. Of the six rounds in that first phase, three teams—Memphis (which would become Houston), Boston, and Chicago—did not sign any of its picks. Seven other teams—Florida (Jacksonville), Toronto (later Memphis), Birmingham, New York, Philadelphia, Washington (which would become Florida), and Detroit—were only able to sign one draft choice.

The Number One draft choice of the WFL was Kansas quarterback David Jaynes, who had broken just about every passing record for the Jayhawks and was fourth in the Heisman Trophy voting in 1973. Despite being the first overall pick in the Wiffle draft, Jaynes instead signed with the Kansas City Chiefs, who drafted him on the third round.

Southern California made headlines by signing its first three picks: UCLA running backs Kermit Johnson and James McAlister, and USC tackle Booker Brown; all three of them were potential first round NFL choices. The trio's agent, 22-year-old Michael Trope, decided not to wait for competitive bidding by the NFL. "Their value was at a peak, 30% to 35% higher than it would have been later, because of the publicity the WFL could get by our signing," said Trope, who approximated the total package at close to $1 million.

The three players arrived late at a press conference that announced their signing because Brown's car, in which they were riding, broke down. "I've been driving a 1967 Buick," said Brown, "but next week I'm going to be driving a 1974 some-thing-or-other."

Hawaii, not surprising since playing football on the islands was quite enticing, did better than anyone, inking four of their first six selections.

But uncertainty about the WFL's future, if it had one, weighed heavily on the minds of several of the draft choices.

"There is a certain amount of security in the NFL," said Ohio State's John Hicks, drafted in the second round by Florida but who chose to sign with the NFL Giants instead.

Before he signed with the Sun, Booker Brown admitted he had been leaning toward the NFL. "All things equal, I'll take the NFL," he said.

Tennessee State linebacker Waymond Bryant, who was drafted by the Washington franchise but who wound up signing with the NFL Bears, spoke for most of the college draftees when he said, "I put a lot of emphasis on playing in the NFL. We had doubts the WFL would get off the ground."

Many people shared Bryant's sentiments, and were skeptical that this new league could indeed ever get off the ground. Few people were taking news of the Wiffle seriously.

Then on March 31st, the NFL and football fans everywhere sat up and took notice. On that day, Toronto signed Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick and Paul Warfield of the Miami Dolphins to "future contracts" to start in 1975 after the three players had played out their options in the NFL.

"The World Football League has done what the NFL hasn't done the last couple of years—make the Miami Dolphins vulnerable," said Dallas Cowboys running back Calvin Hill, who would also ultimately sign with the new league.

Maybe this Wiffle, fans started to say, really meant business.

It did. In a very short time, other top-notch NFL players had begun to ink "future deals" with WFL teams.

Just two days after the Big Three signed with Toronto, Oakland quarterback Kenny Stabler signed with Birmingham. Stabler's signing meant a great deal to the WFL, and was an absolute coup for Birmingham.

A week later, Calvin Hill and New York Giants' quarterback Randy Johnson signed deals with Hawaii.

"I don't want to seem like a money-grubber," said Hill, who signed for roughly $500,000 for three years, "I just want to get paid $100 for every $100 worth of effort. There is nothing that salves my ego about playing in the NFL."

As sports agent Bob Woolf put it, "The war is on and the floodgates are open." He might have added that the switchboards were lighting up. Woolf reported that every NFL club that had a client of his whose contract was up for renewal had called to begin negotiating. Chicago owner Tom Origer said, "The phone was ringing off the wall this week. All kinds of players were calling."

NFL players now had a viable option when seeking a place of employment and / or a pay raise.

Mike Curtis, Ted Hendricks, Roy Hilton, Don McCauley and Rick Volk of the Baltimore Colts, all in the option year of their contracts, expressed a readiness to jump to the new league. Hendricks would eventually sign with Jacksonville for $350,000. Reportedly Jacksonville owner Fran Monaco arrived at this figure when he found out that the highest paid player in the NFL made $340,000.

Dallas quarterback Craig Morton finalized a six-figure deal with the Houston team on the same day that Hill and Kwalick signed.

On April 11th, Dolphins' kicker Garo Yepremian and his brother-advisor Krikor met with Jacksonville owner Fran Monaco to discuss a contract. Yepremian wound up re-signing with Miami. One day later, however, Monaco disclosed that another Dolphins' All-Pro, middle linebacker Nick Bouniconti, had tentatively agreed to play for his team in 1975. Bouniconti said the Sharks offered him a two-year contract at almost four times his salary—which was $62,000 a year—with the Dolphins. Monaco said he was going to meet with two other Dolphins, Manny Fernandez and Bill Stanfill, to discuss contract offers.

The new league seemed to be drawing interest from everywhere. Vida Blue, star pitcher of the Oakland A's and a former high school quarterback, said he still loved football and would like to try playing quarterback in the WFL. "I'm seriously thinking about the World Football League," said Blue, "I haven't made any contact with World Football League personnel, but I think I can contact some of their people."

April 15th saw another Oakland quarterback, Daryle Lamonica, and Rams' linebacker Marlin McKeever signing their names on pacts with Southern California. New York signed veteran defensive end Gerry Philbin on April 25th.

Dallas running back Mike Montgomery signed to join the Birmingham Americans in 1975. "They'll certainly have to take a look at this organization to see why folks are leaving them," Montgomery said of the Cowboys, "Maybe this will help them to get a more human-type relationship to the organization."

NFL owners were absolutely beside themselves. Several NFL teams pursued restraining orders to block WFL teams from signing their players. Miami, after losing Csonka, Kiick and Warfield, sued the WFL, the Toronto franchise and Ed Keating.

Tex Schramm of the Cowboys sought a restraining order from a district court judge to stop the WFL from negotiating with players whose contracts had not expired. Morton, Hill and Montgomery were ordered to not urge other Cowboys to sign with the WFL. Judge Harold Bateman of the Texas Court of Appeals reversed the decision, however.

The signings continued into the spring, and by June, 59 players currently under NFL contracts had signed future deals with the WFL.

Jacksonville signed running backs Harmon Wages of the Falcons and Larry Smith of the Rams, and offensive tackle Guy Dennis of the Lions, all to take effect in 1975. The Sharks also made an offer to Dolphin offensive guard Bob Kuechenberg which far exceeded what he made with Miami. "I didn't expect them to offer the figures they did," said Kuechenberg in May, "I could be financially secure if I accepted Jacksonville's offer. That's something to think about."

Ten days later, Southern California inked Kansas City nose tackle Curley Culp for 1975. Two weeks later, Chicago signed Browns' offensive tackle Bob McKay to a 1975 contract. Miami's Tim Foley agreed to terms with Birmingham for 1975. New York inked Steelers' running back Frenchy Fuqua for 1976. Dallas linebacker D.D. Lewis agreed to a future deal with Memphis, and his Cowboy teammates, Jethro Pugh and Rayfield Wright, signed to play with Birmingham beginning in 1975.

The WFL announced that negotiations were well under way with other NFL stars like Rams guard Tom Mack, Atlanta defensive end Claude Humphrey, who was being wooed by Birmingham, and Packers running back John Brockington, who was looking to sign with Chicago.

The NFL counterattacked, as the Dolphins coughed up a reported $650,000 to keep safety Jake Scott and tight end Jim Mandich from jumping to the new league.

Mandich, a $30,000 a-year free agent with the Miami Dolphins, remembered a four-year, $480,000 offer from Birmingham. "Everybody smelled the money," Mandich said. "But I was first at the trough."

After negotiating for a while, Mandich had one more demand of owner Bill Putnam. "I'd like a Lincoln Continental Mark IV, painted red, white and blue," Mandich said. "And license plates that say, 'Mad Dog.'" Putnam agreed.

Don Shula, who already was losing Csonka, Kiick and Warfield, was stunned by the Mandich offer. The Dolphins, however, matched the contract, making Mandich the NFL's highest-paid tight end. It's unknown whether or not the Dolphins' gave him a red, white and blue Lincoln.

Dallas' Tex Schramm signed linebacker Lee Roy Jordan to a new contract when Jordan said he would

listen to offers from the WFL. Schramm also made sure he signed quarterback Roger Staubach to a new contract extension to ensure he wouldn't jump to the new league.

The Wiffle also had an effect on NFL draft choices. The Cowboys were not thrilled when their third-round draft choice, quarterback Danny White from Arizona State, signed instead with the Toronto franchise. He said the offer from the Northmen was double what Dallas offered. It was the first time Dallas had lost a draft choice to another league since linebacker E.J. Holub signed with the Texans of the AFL in 1961.

Dallas also had to pony up $400,000 for three years to sign top draft pick Ed "Too Tall" Jones, about double what he would have gotten had the Detroit Wheels not been vying for his services.

Through all of the signings and the litigation, Pete Rozelle remained unimpressed. He explained that there was little evidence that any of these contracts would be, or could be, honored.

"In the past," the commissioner stated, "Davidson had promised his investors either a successful league, a successful merger with the established league, or a successful lawsuit if they failed on the field. I didn't think any of those was a realistic option in our case."

Rozelle did also say that the NFL was concerned that the public might think NFL players who had signed WFL contracts for future years might not be doing their best.

"That aura of suspicion concerns me," said Rozelle.

The signings did put the NFL owners on edge and gave them the impression the WFL meant business and had the financial resources to wage an actual signing war with the NFL. The NFL brass cringed at the thought of another battle with an upstart league, remembering the financial wounds they had suffered at the hands of the AFL in the mid 60s.

But these future contracts, while giving the league some credibility and much-needed positive publicity at the time they were announced, soon became an albatross around the league's neck. The WFL teams had enough trouble paying their own personnel, much less the added weight of a contract that called for exorbitant bonus money up front. In the end, the contracts helped bankrupt teams that otherwise were in good financial shape.

Roger Stanton, Editor of the *Football News*, was another who was unimpressed by the future contracts. He wrote that the WFL overpaid to sign many of these stars. "In many instances," Stanton wrote, "the World Football League signed old players, those in their early 30s who are very close to the end of their careers. In order to gain status and acceptance, the World Football League paid far too high a price for name stars. Too often, they overpaid and failed to take age into consideration."

Stanton was skeptical of the Wiffle, and wound up sounding like a football version of The Amazing Kreskin in his article.

"WFL teams have no assurances of filled stadiums," Stanton continued, "In fact half-filled stadiums are more likely and in some instances, it could be worse."

Stanton went on to predict that travel expenses, especially to Hawaii, would prove to be extremely costly; that trying to compete in cities with established NFL teams, such as New York, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, was a mistake; that starting their season in July, especially in hot Southern towns like Birmingham, Orlando, and Jacksonville, was an iffy proposition; and that mid-week games was another questionable decision. Stanton concluded by writing these prophetic words: "But in the long run, the thing that will hurt the WFL most or even cause its demise is the lack of sound economic judgment."

Unfortunately for the WFL, Stanton turned out to be right in almost every point he made.

Cutting Off Your Nose Tackle to Spite Your Face . . .

It was more than coincidental that the vast majority of the players who signed "future contracts" with the WFL were traded, released or otherwise dumped by their current teams. This was done seemingly out of spite. In other words, they cut off their nose tackles to spite their faces. Future Hall-of-Famer Curley Culp was traded by Kansas City to the Oilers. All-Pro Ted Hendricks was traded by Baltimore to Green Bay. Ron Billingsley, Carter Campbell, Levert Carr, Steve Chomyszak and Vin Clements were all released. Both Fred Hoaglin and Bob Newton were left unprotected in the '76 expansion draft. Craig Morton was traded by the Cowboys to the Giants. Detroit shipped Ed Flanagan to San Diego and Rocky Rasley to New Orleans. John Douglas, Edd Hargett, Ron Holliday, John Isenbarger and Randy Johnson were all given their releases. Cecil Turner was sent from the Bears to the 49ers and then released. Tom Drougas was traded from Baltimore to Denver. Larry Smith went from the Rams to the Redskins. Jim Sniadecki and Dick Witcher were both released by the 49ers. It was

no secret these deals were made to teach these players a lesson—don't mess with the NFL, even if it meant the teams had to cut off their nose tackles to spite their faces.

The WFL knew that, more than anything—players, stadiums, or even investors—it needed a TV contract to survive. The income from the contract and the exposure the league would get were essential for it to succeed.

"I think for a major league to survive, it must have a TV package," said Davidson.

But television was not the same then as it is today. This was in those dark and seemingly prehistoric days before cable and 24-hour sports channels. There was no ESPN or any other around-the-clock stations that offered wall-to-wall coverage. The WFL's only choices at the time for TV exposure were CBS, NBC and ABC. Unfortunately, all three networks had contracts with the NFL, and weren't about to sign up with a bunch of rival upstarts.

Had the WFL come into existence a few years later, the league might have actually had a chance to succeed. The money that would have been brought in by a national television contract with a network such as ESPN and the national interest that their game telecasts might have generated could have made all the difference in the world, pardon the pun, for the fledgling league. But in 1974, the league's only national television alternative to the major networks was the TVS Television Network, a national syndicator of sports programming.

After meeting with the honchos at TVS and negotiating a deal, the league signed a television contract with the network. One league game would be televised each week on Thursday nights. That is, each week except the week of September 12th. That, you see, was season premiere week for the major networks. The WFL might have the cajones to take on the NFL, but they weren't about to buck up against the viewers of "The Waltons" and "The Streets of San Francisco." Professional football had never been televised nationally in midweek before—except for the Thanksgiving Day games—and at the time it was viewed as a radical idea and quite a gamble on the part of the new league. It might have been, but now, the NFL has a Thursday night game almost every week of the season.

"On Thursdays, people will have stopped talking about last weekend's NFL games, and won't have started talking about the games for next weekend," proclaimed TVS' 38-year-old president, Eddie Einhorn.

Merle Harmon and Alex Hawkins were hired as the announcers for the TVS Thursday night game. Harmon would provide the play-by-play, and Hawkins, one of the more colorful characters in NFL history, would appropriately supply the color commentary. They were actually a pretty good team and worked well together. Guest announcers were scheduled to be brought into the booth on a weekly basis, including footballers such as Paul Hornung, Don Perkins and Alex Karras, and celebrities such as McLean Stevenson, George Plimpton and Burt Reynolds. TVS said that 110 affiliates signed on to air the league's games, or roughly 85 percent of the country.

"I believe the WFL has already attained credibility," Einhorn concluded, "Our pitch to the stations and to advertisers is, 'Can you afford *not* to be in on it if it takes off?'"

"We're going to have name players, good coaching, improved rules, and a first-class TV production," insisted WFL publicist Max Muhleman, "We think that football is one game that hasn't crested yet."

The WFL had made its mark, and seemed ready to take off. It was no longer being dismissed as merely a vicious rumor.

Say What?

Player Agent Bob Woolf actually said in the spring of 1974, "Truthfully, I'm pretty damned impressed. I believe this WFL is going to be a serious operation."

Training camps opened at the beginning of June. The camps for the most part were well run. But most teams were a mix of CFL and NFL refugees, ex-minor leaguers, free agents, and rookies. The lack of big-name players and stars did not bode well for business for the new league. Art Spander, writing in *The Sporting News*, called the WFL players "just a bunch of people you wouldn't know in a crowd of two."

But despite that and all the uncertainty rampant in the league in the spring of '74, what with teams moving and changing names and investors investing and then deciding not to, the Wiffle thought it had one thing going for it as its first season approached.

A strike.

It looked like the conflict between the NFLPA and the club owners would devolve into a work stoppage. Sure enough, on July 1st, the players went on strike, picketing training camp sites in t-shirts with a clenched fist and the motto "No Freedom, No Football"

emblazoned on the front. It was the first major work stoppage in pro football history.

The players were demanding guarantee salaries and a new Collective Bargaining Agreement altogether. The Players' Association was also challenging the so-called "Rozelle Rule" as a violation of federal antitrust laws in a lawsuit filed by President John Mackey and allied union leaders in 1971. The rule, named after Commissioner Pete Rozelle, allowed the commissioner to award compensation, which included players, to a team losing a free agent if both the signing team and the team the player was leaving could not come to an agreement on compensation. This rule limited player movement, as few teams were willing to sign a high-profile free agent only to risk having their rosters raided. With the 1970 CBA agreement set to expire, the players went on strike on July 1st, 1974. In addition to the "Rozelle Rule," the players demanded the elimination of the option clause, impartial arbitration of disputes, elimination of the draft and waiver system and individual, rather than uniform, contracts.

Word of an NFL strike had to make the WFL owners act like a collection of Snidely Whiplashes, laughing evilly while they tied the NFL owners to the railroad tracks. An NFL strike could be just what the WFL needed to get a foothold with the American public. If the WFL was the only game in town, it would give them a leg up on the established league.

Not only was the NFL on strike, the CFL players had also walked out on their owners. More than 270 veteran players voluntarily "retired" in the middle of June. Their demands included a higher minimum salary, increased training camp expenses, more money for preseason games, and a bigger portion of Grey Cup revenue for both the winning and losing team.

The Wiffle was now the only game in all of North America.

After many of the franchises had moved around the country for weeks like homeless waifs, all of the teams had finally found a home, and the League had settled on a three-division setup. In the Eastern Division were the Florida Blazers, Jacksonville Sharks, New York Stars, and Philadelphia Bell.

The Central Division included the Birmingham Americans, Chicago Fire, Detroit Wheels and Memphis Southmen.

In the Western Division, the lineup was The Hawaiians, Houston Texans, Portland Storm, and Southern California Sun.

The liberal use of singular team nicknames was quite a radical step for the average sports fan. Singular names had been used by sports teams sporadically for years, but the WFL was the first major sports league to have such a proliferation of singular names. Of course, at the time the move was criticized. Art Spander wrote in *The Sporting News*, "Fire, Storm, Sun. Is this a football league or Indian lore?" Now practically every sports league includes teams with singular names.

So, the WFL was finally ready to play.

But who was going to win the thing? All the teams were brand-new and there was no way in telling at the outset as to who would be good or who would be bad.

"You might as well take all the names of the teams and toss them in a hat and draw them out one by one," said Chicago owner Tom Origer, "There's just no way to tell who's going to win this thing."

Charlie Vincent, writing for *The Sporting News*, took a stab at it, picking New York, Birmingham and Houston to win their respective divisions, with the Stars and the Americans predicted to play in the first World Bowl.

The WFL's 1974 season opened in July, and attendance figures were promising during the league's first couple of weeks of existence. As the owners had hoped, the WFL seemed to be helped tremendously by the NFL players' strike. Without the NFL to focus on, the WFL seemed to be gaining that essential foothold they needed so desperately to succeed.

At least with the WFL there was football, and it drew tremendous crowds. During the first few weeks of the season, the WFL looked to be a resounding success. An announced 258,624 people turned out for the six WFL games in the opening week of action, an average of just a little less than 43,000 a game. Philadelphia drew over 55,534 people in its home opener, and two weeks later announced that over 64,719 had attended a game against New York. Jacksonville's opener in the Gator Bowl drew 59,112 people. Davidson admitted that he was "awestruck."

The figures that came out later, however, must have really left the Commissioner awestruck. Jacksonville admitted that a majority of their tickets for the opener had been given away. Philadelphia announced that their 120,000 admissions included 100,000 tickets either given away at a deep discount or distributed free of cost.

News of the giveaways crushed the WFL. Whatever credibility it had managed to gain was wiped away in one fell swoop. No one was going to believe anything the league said or promised. The owners were viewed as charlatans and sideshow barkers.

The league lasted another 15 months, but in reality it died right then and there.

"It makes all of our lives a little difficult because credibility is very important to us in this first year," said Sun President Larry Hatfield, "I was aghast at the way the Philadelphia situation was handled. It was atrocious. It's bush. Now we're all suspect."

"It doesn't help the league's credibility at all," said New York GM Bob Keating, "It really hurts when you do something like this. It was shocking to say the least. I can't justify it at all. If you give out free tickets, say so."

In an article for *The New York Times*, Murray Chass called the WFL the "World Freebie League."

Granted the WFL was not helped by the NFL jumping on every little tidbit of negative information about the Wiffle and running with it. This was to be expected. The NFL was not going to welcome the WFL with open arms, especially since they were playing in the NFL's backyard in six cities.

On the heels of what became known as the "Papergate" scandal, or "Sugargate" as some called it, since most of the discounts went through a promotion run by Domino Sugar, it was also discovered that several teams had paid less than the original $120,000 franchise fee in order to meet Davidson's target of 12 teams, and that league officials had conducted little to no due diligence. In other words, they hadn't bothered to conduct anything as mundane as a background check. As a result, seven of the 12 teams were badly under-capitalized, and soon began to experience severe financial problems.

In an article for *Pro Football Weekly* in which he predicted the demise of the WFL, Jerry Magee wrote, "'All things considered,' the words on the gravestone could read, 'we should not have given away those tickets.'"

Papergate

After Watergate, nearly every conspiracy or scandal uncovered in the media has had the suffix "gate" added to it. The WFL was no different. And like the Watergate scandal that brought down a President, the "Papergate" scandal, or "Sugargate" as it was sometimes referred to, brought down the World Football League. In the middle of July 1974, it looked like the WFL was off to a fantastic start. Attendance figures were way above expectations, prompting Commissioner Gary Davidson to exclaim, "I am awestruck!"

Nowhere was this more surprising than Philadelphia. Roundly considered the "weak sister" of the league, the Bell announced a crowd of 55,534 for their opener against Portland, a figure which looked even more impressive when compared to the fact that the Phillies drew only 35,000 across the street at the Vet. At their next home game, the Bell did even better, drawing 64,719 to JFK for a contest against New York. League officials were positively ecstatic. Here was the league's supposed questionable franchise doing business like gangbusters. But it was all a charade. Rumors and whispers circulated that the attendance figures for the two games might have been inflated. Now, giving away tickets for free or for a discount is an age-old practice in sports. Tickets are handed out for contests and store giveaways to help promote the team, and get people to come out and, hopefully, come back again. Usually the paid tickets will outnumber the free and discounted ducats by a large margin. But the Bell had taken "papering the house"—hence the name "Papergate"—to a whole new level, maybe even an art form.

When the IRS came to collect, the Bell had to admit that they had given away the vast majority of the tickets. When the figures were added up, they were mind-boggling. Of the 55,534 people in attendance for the Bell's opener, only 13,800 had actually paid their way in. For the second home game, the figures are even more incredible. That night, of the 64,719 people in the stands, only 6,200—less than 10% of the people in the stands—had actually paid for their tickets! The reason some people referred to it as "Sugargate" was because many of the discounted and free tickets were through a promotion with Domino Sugar. The giveaways were obviously intended to spark the public's curiosity and interest. But because of the whole sordid episode, for all intents and purposes the World Football League died right then and there. Nobody was going to believe a thing they said. Their credibility was completely shot. Sure, it lasted for a little over a year and still lives on in the hearts and minds of fans and collectors like the author and others, but it really died then and there. "After that came out," said TVS president Eddie Einhorn, "we didn't sell one minute of advertising. Not one!" "We're not doing any papering," insisted Sun owner Larry Hatfield, "There'll be nights when we give away about 1,300 freebies, but that's it." A headline in the Los Angeles times referred to the WFL as "The World Freebie League." But Charlie Vincent had the best line in the whole

affair when he wrote in his column for *The Sporting News*, "That proves those people wrong who said, 'The WFL? They won't be able to give tickets away!'"

There was another aspect of the new league that was a big disappointment—a lot of the games were low scoring affairs. Despite all the rule changes designed to give the league's offense a boost, only two of the 12 teams scored more than 17 points and in four of the six games the two teams together scored three touchdowns or fewer. At the opener in Jacksonville, Davidson accepted congratulations while mumbling, "I wish we'd get some more scoring."

The league never really did. Their games were no more exciting or high-scoring than those in the NFL. Combine this with no marquee players and low attendance figures, and the Wiffle wound up not offering a viable option to the NFL to the nation's football fans.

Despite Papergate, the other giveaway scandals, and all the other negative aspects of the early stages of the NFL, Davidson was confident that the Wiffle would do well in '74 and would expand for 1975. "Tokyo probably has the best chance, with Mexico City a close second," he said. The league was also looking into expanding within the U.S., and Davidson said that Dallas, with the Cotton Bowl as the teams' home stadium, was one of the leading contenders.

But Davidson quickly realized that Mexico City was not a viable option for the Wiffle when he made a trip to the city. "I had gone down to Mexico City in August of 1974," recalled Davidson, "In Mexico at that time if you wanted to be on the front page you simply bought space. Which is a flat bribe. We had a press conference, and all kinds of coverage, but the problem with moving into Mexico was that you had to price the house in the same proportion of the overall economy. If you had one millionaire and ninety-nine peasants, 1% of the house was priced to the millionaire and the 99% to the peasants, your ticket price would have been 25 cents. The only way to survive would have been to buy out the government."

In August, the WFL got more bad news. After striking for 42 days, the NFL players eventually decided to take the matter of their strike to the courts, and the union's executive director Edward Garvey encouraged the players to return to work. Fortunately for the NFL, and no so much for the WFL, no regular season games faced cancellation or postponement, just an exhibition game. Nevertheless, the courts eventually favored the players. The strike had lasted until August 10th, 1974 when the players returned to training camp without a new CBA.

The WFL was no longer the only game in town. Their row to hoe had just gotten a lot more difficult, and the hill they would have to climb had just gotten a lot steeper.

See you in court, counselor . . .

The WFL spent more time in court than a basketball league. Their history is filled with as many restraining orders, writs, and lawsuits as touchdowns, tackles and field goals. But that's what happens when your league is founded by lawyers. On August 16th, 1974, the league found itself once again facing court action. The New England Colonials of the Atlantic Coast Football League filed a $4.2 million damage suit against the WFL in U.S. District Court, asking the court to issue a restraining order to keep former Colonials players from participating in the WFL. Colonials' President Richard Cahill said the suit charged the WFL with violation of the Sherman Act and contractural agreements with Colonials players. Cahill said that the major targets of the suit were last year's starters from the Colonials championship team: Andy Huff and Bill DeFlavio of the Stars, Ron Maree, Eddie Sheats, and Rod Foster of the Blazers, and Skip Parmenter of the Bell.

The season soon became filled with stories of financial and other kinds of misadventures. Again, many negative stories were exaggerated and over reported thanks to the NFL, which relished in the trials and tribulations of their new rival. But the Wiffle did not help itself by making some bad business decisions, stupid choices, inexperienced mistakes and some awful and weird ideas.

There was the story of the Charlotte general manager, who had to travel with $18,000 in cold, hard cash to get his players checked into a hotel because the league's credit was so bad. The team had by then resorted to practicing in a public park, with Frisbee-throwing youths getting mixed up in the workout.

At one point, the best-known player Houston had under contract was quarterback Karl Sweetan, who was best-known for an alleged attempt to sell his Los Angeles Rams' playbook to the New Orleans Saints.

The WFL at times displayed an almost amateurish approach when attempting to sign college players. Boston College center Steve Corbett, a sixth-round

selection of the then-Boston Bulls, said disgustedly, "I got a letter from the Bulls that started, 'Dear Prospect.'"

After their seventh game, when Florida's players went to the bank with their checks, many of them found the banks would not cash them. The team would not receive any salary from management for the rest of the season.

These and other problems began to emphasize the glaring weaknesses of the WFL, the most obvious of which were: most of the clubs were operating on no more than a shoestring budget; too many teams were playing in small stadiums, with four of them (a quarter of the league) holding less than 30,000 fans; the Wiffle was finding it difficult when going head-to-head with the NFL in their shared markets; and the rest of the WFL cities were not big enough TV markets to keep the league afloat.

According to TVS president Eddie Einhorn, the Thursday night telecasts actually got pretty good ratings at first. But he was not impressed with the overall results, although he claimed he did "finish in the black."

Einhorn said, "It started off very strong. We sold over half of it before the season started because of all the hullabaloo. The ratings were good, and we expected a second wave of orders to come in and then we would make real good money. However, after about the fifth week the New York franchise moved. Then that scandal in Philadelphia. The first thing that got the credibility of the league in trouble was that phonying of the attendance. From that day, and the day the Stars moved to Charlotte, we never got another nickel's worth of business."

Affiliates started to bail after the Philadelphia and Jacksonville "Papergate" scandals. When two other teams, Houston and New York, moved in the middle of the season and two more, Detroit and Jacksonville, folded altogether, the exodus of the affiliates began in earnest, and they resembled rats fleeing a sinking ship. By the time of the World Bowl, the games were struggling to achieve Nielsen ratings above 2.0. Einhorn said it was nearly impossible to sell advertising.

"At the end of the year no one was getting paid," Einhorn continued, "This was in the paper every day. There was too much competition for the league to survive. By the time we got to the World Bowl we went from about an eight rating to a two. All of this I attribute to credibility. The credibility killed it. Also there is this big city prejudice, see. A person who lives in New York is insulted to go see San Antonio, a burg like that. He wants Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia. If the little burgs ever beat you, it's ridiculous. It's insulting."

Maybe TVS color commentator Alex Hawkins put it in perspective better than anyone. "This was easily the most fascinating league ever spawned," Hawkins wrote in his book, *Then Came Brain Damage*, "The whole thing was so bizarre, you couldn't help but love it."

All the problems in the league, the shifting franchises, fluid schedules and last minute changes, also created havoc with the TVS broadcast crew.

"Howard Zuckerman, our director, owned the mobile unit that we telecast from," said Hawkins in *Then Came Brain Damage*, "Three of our cameramen all but lived in the unit. They got the same news I got every Tuesday. They had two days to get the truck to the game site. It could be Portland, Orlando, or anywhere in between—no one ever knew. They usually drove to Kansas City on Fridays, the center of the country."

In early September, when the NFL made its final cuts before the season began, quite a few of these players signed with the WFL. The additions of these veterans bolstered the rosters of quite a few Wiffle teams, and several teams—notably Portland and The Hawaiians—played much better in the second half of the season.

But not everybody was impressed with the additions of these players.

"What ruined the WFL was when the NFL started cutting players we picked them up," said Hugh Wyatt, Director of Player Personnel for the Philadelphia Bell. "The former NFL players were spoiled brats who just wanted the money and wanted everyone to do everything for them. The original WFL guys would have done anything to help the league survive and when we brought in the ex-NFLers, the mercenaries, that's when it got bad. I loved those first WFL guys—they played for the love of the game.

"The original WFL players, the guys who suffered through training camp and were there for opening day would have done anything to have the league be a success," Wyatt continued, "They would have played for free, and many of them did."

I Get No Kick Out of You . . .

The Wiffle had as much trouble finding reliable placekickers and punters as it did finding fans in 1974. The league went through kickers that season like a thresher through wheat. When all was said and done and the dust had cleared, the 12 WFL teams employed 58 players as either kickers or punters. Birmingham used just two players—Grant Guthrie and Earl Sark—to

handle their kicking chores. But the rest of the teams tried anyone they could find—linebackers, quarterbacks, wide receivers, defensive tackles, offensive guards; basically anyone who had kicked in high school or college or had played "kick the can" when he was a kid. The two teams that had the most trouble settling on a kicker were Southern California, who tried nine kickers, and Philadelphia, which because of poor results and lack of patience, wound up using 11 different players to either kick or punt, which may be some sort of weird record. When asked about his team's kickers, Bell wide receiver Vince Papale said, "They walk around talking to themselves." To put this is in some kind of perspective, the 26 NFL teams used 64 kickers in 1974. Amazingly, some of the Wiffle kickers were actually well-known. Chuck Latourette of Houston had been the punter for the Cardinals for 4 years in the late 60s and early 70s. Chicago's Chuck Ramsey went on to kick in the NFL with the Jets for 8 years. Danny White of Memphis was a punter and quarterback for the Cowboys for 13 years. Philadelphia's Richie Szaro kicked in the NFL for five years and was a teammate of Ramsey's with the Jets in '79. Ken Clark of Portland was a top punter in the CFL for 13 years and was a member of the Rams '79 Super Bowl team.

In September, both the Houston and New York franchises had to move to new cities after failing miserably. "When *The Sporting News* asked me to predict where the WFL's 12 teams would finish back in July, I had no idea that meant geographically," wrote Charlie Vincent in his weekly column.

While cities like Charlotte and Shreveport had their attractions, it was not a good sign that a supposed "world" football league was abandoning major markets for smaller ones. In the mid-70s, the South was more sparsely populated and therefore less economically potent than other parts of the country. The area did not make much of an impression on the major television networks. That meant a lack of advertising dollars, and a lack of dollars meant a lack of football. It was as simple as all that.

In mid-October, the league finally and mercifully folded both the Detroit and Jacksonville franchises.

"We feel while we have had our problems, we have not ignored them," said Gary Davidson. "I feel very positively we have turned the corner." And run smack into another brick wall the way the league's luck was running.

The owners were getting tired of Davidson's dog-and-pony show. Almost all of them had lost significant amounts of money on the Wiffle. On October 20th, the owners met in a private meeting in Los Angeles. All but one of the owners—Larry Hatfield of Southern California—agreed that Davidson had lost his credibility.

"If they had actually voted that night," said Hatfield, "I'm sure they would have thrown Gary out."

The following morning, at the official league meeting, Davidson presided over what turned out to be a rather optimistic gathering. The meeting began with a positive appraisal of the Orlando situation by league general counsel Don Regan.

"Everyone was feeling optimistic about things after that and the subject of Gary's status never came up," said Hatfield.

But the warm, fuzzy feelings lasted just a little over the week. Not surprisingly, it was Tom Origer who finally said that enough was enough.

On Monday the 28th, Bassett, serving as Chairman of the WFL's Executive Committee, said in Toronto that an "emergency meeting" had been called for the next day, the 29th, to discuss the possible immediate withdrawal of the Chicago franchise. Bassett termed the Fire management "completely irresponsible" for dropping out at this stage of the season. Tom Origer had hinted that he would pull his team out of league with three games still remaining on the schedule. Origer said that because his team's home schedule had already been completed, there would be no possible source of any new income.

Don Andersen, WFL vice president in charge of public relations, confirmed from his Newport Beach home on the 28th that the meeting would indeed be held, and that the situation involving the Fire would be discussed. But he added, "There has been nothing positive to this point as to the status or future of the Chicago club." Andersen denied the report that the Fire had informed league headquarters it was halting operations.

Origer and Chicago coach Jim Spavital were unavailable for comment, and Chicago team publicist Jim Walker, reached at the team's office, said, "There has been no word from Mr. Origer to the ballclub. Everybody has been waiting for the outcome of the meeting. I guess we'll find out then."

Virgil Carter, the club's injured quarterback and player representative, said his contract had not been cancelled nor had he been paid for the remainder of the season. "There have been rumors all year that the Fire was going to fold," he said. Those rumors

surfaced again on the 28th when Bassett, owner of the World Hockey Association Toronto Toros, told reporters at the Toros game that the Fire had notified the league it would not play its last three games. Chicago was scheduled to play in Philadelphia against the Bell on the 30th. If the rumors were true and Origer and the Fire were indeed finished, that meant that the Fire would become the third WFL franchise—a quarter of the original teams—to go under before the first regular season had been completed.

The emergency meeting of the owners had indeed been called by Origer and took place on the 29th in Chicago. The Fire owner then gave his fellow owners an ultimatum—replace Davidson as commissioner or he would disband his franchise. "He goes or I go," Origer said, adding that he simply could not co-exist with the commissioner.

"If they had stayed on their self-destruct course, I would have said the hell with it," said Origer.

"There is no way that Davidson qualifies as a commissioner," said one club representative, "He's a brilliant organizer and an unbelievably clever lawyer. He can find loopholes in loopholes, he's so smart. There was a strong drive to get rid of him. Several teams simply wanted to chuck the whole thing before the losses got too steep."

"I felt some major changes had to be made to change our image as far as attracting new investors," said Origer, "I felt we had to get off our self-destruct course. And I think everyone was thinking it. What the hell, it's the owners' league."

"There's been a lot of money pissed away by the league, and the owners knew that," Origer went on to say, "I don't have to tell the owners that they've been paying the money. I think there'll be some real belt-tightening now and the budget will be chopped drastically."

What had also been chopped was Davidson's head. The owners had wanted it on a platter and that's what they got.

"Gary was the focal point of the league and the league was in trouble," said John Bassett, "It's the same old story—when the team is in trouble, you fire the coach."

"Many of the owners supported Gary's resignation," said Hawaiians' owner Chris Hemmeter, "some did not."

"It took Gary's know how to get us this far," said Larry Hatfield, who said he regretted Davidson's departure, "He's done this sort of thing before, in basketball and hockey. People say we should have waited until 1975. We wouldn't have had a prayer if we'd waited a year and he knew it."

"Walking down that corridor in Chicago past all the cameras," Davidson said. "That was the low point."

Chicago GM Al Lange stated, "Owners and people with money will be making the decisions now." The league announced it would shift its offices from Newport Beach, California to New York City in 1975.

Donald Regan, who had been serving as the league's general counsel, was named League Executive Director in lieu of a commissioner. But the Wiffle would be directed by its six-member executive committee. And who was one of the members of the executive committee? Why none other than Gary Davidson! He would also retain his positions as chairman of the league's expansion committee and part-owner of the Sun. Only in the Wiffle . . .

"We were extremely concerned at that point in time," said Chris Hemmeter, owner of The Hawaiians, "The weakest teams in the WFL were determining its success, or its level of success. We had to decide if it was in our best interest to subsidize these teams to protect our investment. I think for an extended period of time we felt intimidated, or forced, that we had to invest more money to protect the money we had in. What happened is that, for those owners, a lot of the fun left the league. Everything became an economic struggle instead of an athletic event; it took a lot of bloom off the rose."

"We have no problems for which there are no solutions," said Bassett, "It's simply a matter of nailing down the planks."

"We need those Orlando and Jacksonville franchises re-financed and we need a big name guy for 1976 in New York," said Southern California GM Curly Morrison, "If we can solve those three areas now, we'd all have the same feeling of euphoria we had in the first couple weeks of the season."

On November 8th, a couple "big name guys" seemed ready to throw their hats—or helmets—into the ring as far as a New York franchise was concerned. Wiffle officials announced that Joe Namath was considering buying a WFL franchise and becoming pro football's only player / owner.

According to John Bassett, Namath was one of three prospective buyers with whom the WFL was discussing the possibility of a New York franchise that would begin play in 1976. Bassett also said that one of the other prospective buyers was Broadway producer David Merrick. The other investors were an unnamed law firm.

Late in the season, there was also speculation that the Wiffle might merge with the Canadian Football League. That's right, the same Canadian Football

League that moved to bar John Bassett's Toronto Northmen from playing in the country! The same Canadian Football League that must have watched with smiles on their faces when the Wiffle's only sojourn into Canada—the Labor Day game between Detroit and Portland at London, Ontario—attracted maybe a couple thousand curiosity seekers. Needless to say, the CFL was not rushing to the negotiating table to talk merger with their floundering cousins from south of the border.

Montreal Alouettes owner Sam Berger said, "I don't want to become involved in even thinking about it at this time. I don't know what they mean by merger. With whom? It might not even be worthwhile to look at it."

Charlie Vincent said in *The Sporting News* that the WFL and CFL would make an "ideal mismarriage" and equated a merger between the two as being "like one non-swimmer jumping overboard to rescue another non-swimmer."

It seemed that Otto Jelinek, a member of Canada's House of Commons, was talking up the WFL-CFL merger and claimed he had found some sentiment for it on both sides of the border. But many found the idea hard to take seriously.

John Bassett stated that Parliament should be more "worried about economic inflation, not football inflation."

"Why would we want to merge with the World Football League?" asked CFL and Edmonton Eskimos president Jim Hole, "They have nothing to offer."

In its November 16th, 1974 issue, the *Pro Football Weekly* predicted the death of the WFL in an editorial titled: "WFL—it's All Over but the Autopsy." In it, author Art Arkush said that despite the ouster of Davidson, the league was pretty much dead in the water. He said that John Bassett was "whistling his way past the graveyard" after saying that the WFL "had turned around" and that "a number of very strong owners were looking forward to the playoffs and the 1975 season."

"Even Bassett and the most opportunistic owners agree that if they are going to play next year," Arkush said, "They must have fresh blood in the form of new investors. But in complete candor, who in their right mind, in this economy, would want to get involved in what the WFL has become. As a matter of fact, as one WFL owner put it, 'how in good conscience can we bring anyone into this mess?'"

The Wiffle received more bad news when TVS Vice President Alan Lubell reported that the network would turn over only about $500,000 in television revenue to the league (that's to the *league*, folks, not for each team!), about half of what was anticipated when the league signed with the network before the season.

Lubell blamed the poor financial showing on "the stories they were papering the house in Jacksonville and Philadelphia. There was a feeling that the league was tainted, going under, and a prejudice developed among potential investors."

In late November, the WFL held a meeting in Memphis. The League was limping toward the season's finish line, and fan apathy and financial strife were making the mood around the WFL less than optimistic. League officials, however, asserted that the meeting was indeed very positive.

Don Andersen, the WFL's vice-president for public relations, said the meeting was "the most constructive the league has had since the wave of horrible things started happening at mid-season.

"Bob Wussler, vice president of sports for CBS, was at the Memphis meeting," continued Andersen, "and said not only his network, but the other networks, too, would be interested in the WFL in a couple years. He made no promises and no offers, but he likened our position to that of the AFL, when television played such a big role in that league's success."

Another positive aspect of the meeting was the presence of nearly 30 potential investors, including some from cities that did not have WFL franchises in '74, who were there to listen to what new league president Chris Hemmeter had to say.

"Expansion is still a possibility," Andersen went on, "even international expansion to Mexico City. A lot of pluses came out of that meeting. The general tone of the meeting was very optimistic. The consensus was that the WFL will be back in 1975 . . . stronger than ever."

Well, it certainly couldn't be any weaker!

But many others had their doubts. Alan R. Miller, executive director of the WFL Players Association, believed that somewhere between $4 million and $7 million in compensation was still owed by the various franchises to their players. Total debt accrued around the league was estimated to be $20-million.

The IRS still had numerous claims against the league's teams. Tom Origer was looking to dump his Chicago franchise. Bob Harris and Bruce Gelker had disavowed any further interest in the Portland team, and Harris said he'd just like to forget the whole darn thing. Even some of the more substantial owners were worried that some of the irresponsible actions of their fellow owners had ruined any hope for future outside investment. The whole thing seemed to be in a state

of flux or limbo, and many thought it should be just folded and forgotten.

"At this point the league has no credibility," said John Bassett.

Hemmeter himself said that while he was confident that league would survive to see the light of another season, he added that "unless we can resolve our financial problems by February or March, folding the league will be one of our options."

Davidson's plan had ground to a screeching halt. The Lamar Hunts of the sports world had not materialized.

"The timing for the WFL was right and wrong," moaned Jacksonville Sharks Owner Fran Monaco, who like his brethren had taken his share of lumps, "its right for football, but this is the wrong time in the economy."

"The WFL was a bit too slow; they caught the wave, but a bit too late," said Hugh Wyatt, Director of Player Personnel for the Bell, "The economy was terrible, gas prices were sky high, the cost of transportation and charter flights was increasing, and a lot of this had an effect on the paper fortunes that these guys had. Many of the WFL owners had money tied up in real estate and were watching their fortunes dwindle. One of the heavy hitters in the WFL was a guy named Tom Origer, in Chicago; he had all a lot of money in real estate that went south. Timing for the sport was right and the NFL learned some lessons that weren't going to repeat themselves.

"The NFL had the major markets tied up." Wyatt continued, "Some of the stadiums were not available. The one thing that has been changed after all these rival leagues has been salaries. Agents were never that prominent in the 70's and the WFL helped drive the cost of talent up. You can't have a major league without major talent. For a new league to work, a league like the XFL, you would have to do what the NFL did for years, and that's put the interest of the league ahead of the interest of the owners and individual teams."

"Any new league is going to have problems," said Bassett, "The only thing that scares me is something I never anticipated, the general economic condition of the country. Money is tight, whether you're running a shoe factory or a football franchise. A couple of years ago people were lined up in droves for the chance to finance a professional team, for ego or whatever purposes. Those people aren't around anymore."

Bassett also didn't have much good to say about his fellow owners, whom he described as "a lot of people who wanted to play with other people's money."

The financial difficulties had ended Davidson's talk of worldwide expansion to an intercontinental league. "I'm more for consolidation and solidification in 1975, rather than expanding to new cities," he said, "We probably should have started with 10 teams instead of 12 and made them all solid in ownership and funding."

Others echoed these sentiments.

When asked what the Wiffle could have done differently to survive, Chicago quarterback Virgil Carter said, "Real simple. Eight teams, eight good owners and a twelve game season. I think 20 games was too long. Some of the teams didn't sell enough tickets to survive that long a season."

Quarterback Bob Davis said he agreed with that "wholeheartedly.," as did J.J. Jennings of Memphis. "I think in the right locations," Jennings explained, "There were certain franchises that couldn't make it through the season and some of the stronger owners helped finance the struggling teams. We, Birmingham, Hawaii, Southern California and Chicago were strong financially."

"The biggest mistake in my opinion that they played way too many games," Southern California quarterback Tony Adams told Aaron Johnson at wflnation.com, "I think we had 20 regular season games. You know at the time when they developed that league if they'd have played no more than 14 games and then play the championship game that league would have eventually, some of the cities would have merged with the NFL, I think. Because they had good players, they had good locations and they had great support in certain areas but man, when you play 20 regular season games and 2 preseason games, that's 22 games without the playoffs. Then you incur all those expenses. Travel expenses, payroll, due dates. There are a number of things that take place when you play that long. Plus when you play 22 games you are very well beat up. And I think at the end of the year you lose some of the quality of play because everybody's in that condition. But if you play 14 games and then basically the playoffs and then a championship game you're done with the season, it's successful, and I think you can probably get a good TV contract. I think they would have been able to negotiate a pretty good TV contract if they got through that first season without a bunch of financial issues related to the owners and from the teams and all that stuff. But every time something happened negatively it got exposed and I don't think that potential TV partners had a lot of confidence in the fact that the league was going to make it or not make it."

George Mira believed a salary cap might have helped the WFL. "All you had to do was set a salary

cap," stressed Mira, "All these guys jumping from the NFL for the big money, and there were a lot of guys who would have played for $20,000. They should've put their efforts into getting a major television deal. TV would have done a lot for the WFL."

Playing a 20-game schedule—six games longer than the NFL's then 14-game slate—ultimately proved to be too costly to the Wiffle. The WFL staged no exhibition games, which then made the first few weeks of games dull, boring and poorly played. The season began on Wednesday, July 10th and ended on Wednesday, November 13th. This was actually a 20-game season scrunched into 19 weeks—a schedule accomplished by having double games (primarily Monday and Friday) on Labor Day weekend. Another problem was The Hawaiians insistence on Sunday afternoon games. Although most teams played on Wednesday nights with a national TV game slated for Thursday nights, The Hawaiians refused to play on weekdays and instead opted to play their home games on Sunday afternoons. This meant that when The Hawaiians had a home game, they played an opponent who flew to Honolulu after having played just four days earlier. In addition, back-to-back meetings between two teams were common.

The remedy the WFL was attempting for its woes—franchise shifts to smaller cities where there is high interest and little or no competition from other professional sports—was common in new leagues, and it was not a sign that total collapse was inevitable. The ABA had endured 12 franchise shifts, yet was about to start its eighth season. Even the AFL had its share of franchise difficulties. The Los Angeles Chargers had to move to San Diego. The New York franchise had to be taken over by the league. Even Lamar Hunt had to move his franchise, the Dallas Texans, north to Kansas City.

But when a league promises Tokyo, London, and Rome, and winds up in Shreveport, San Antonio and Charlotte, the people aren't going to go for it. Sometimes it just doesn't pay to promise someone the "world."

CHAPTER 3

Sweet Home Alabama

The Birmingham Americans, 1974

"I've looked under every rock there is to look under, and there is simply no significant money forthcoming."

—BILL PUTNAM, owner, Birmingham Americans

With all the tales of financial hardship that were so prevalent in the World Football League in 1974, one of more positive things that came out of the morass of that season was the Birmingham Americans. Operating out of pro football virgin territory in Alabama, the Americans were one of the most successful of all WFL franchises. They led the league in attendance, won their first 10 games in a row, won all 13 of their home games and finished with a 15-and-5 record, second-best in the league.

But like other Wiffle franchises, the Americans got off to an uncertain start.

On December 14th, 1973, local Birmingham businessman Frank Falkenburg claimed he was offered the Birmingham franchise in the WFL.

"I worked on it originally and finally wound up turning it down," Falkenburg said, citing the poor economic factors in the country in his decision, adding that he just couldn't make the numbers work. Another factor in his decision was that an earlier group which had negotiated for a National Football League expansion team could get no concessions or parking rights from the city for Legion Field. Rent of the stadium would have been ten percent of the gate; at the time most NFL teams paid only one or two percent. Falkenburg declined, saying that anyone trying to bring a team to Birmingham should expect to lose $1 million the first year.

"They're shooting to try and get Joe Namath," Falkenburg said. Namath, the former University of Alabama and current Jets quarterback, was rumored to have been involved as a player and/or owner, and would have been a real coup for a Birmingham franchise.

Gerald Wallace, brother of Alabama Governor George Wallace, was also reportedly interested in rights to the franchise.

In an announcement on that same day, December 14th, 1973, WFL Commissioner Gary Davidson named the likely franchise cities for the 1974 WFL season, and one of those was Birmingham.

Six days later, the rights to the franchise were finally given to an Atlanta businessman named Bill Putnam, who had been involved with franchises in the NBA and the NHL. Putnam, a former Navy underwater demolitions expert, had served on the Board of Directors of the NFL's New York Jets, Philadelphia Eagles, Cleveland Browns and the National Basketball Association's Baltimore Bullets.

After leaving the J.P. Morgan Company in 1965, he moved to Los Angeles to become the Executive Vice President of Jack Kent Cooke Enterprises. He was instrumental in acquiring the site where the new Forum was built, along with helping to establish the National Hockey League's Los Angeles Kings. He was also responsible for the purchase and early operation of the National Basketball Association's Los Angeles Lakers franchise for Cooke.

In 1966 he founded and became President of the NHL's expansion Philadelphia Flyers. Putnam sold the Flyers in 1970 for a tidy profit and worked as a sports consultant. It was here that he became friends with Gary Davidson.

The next year, Tom Cousins brought Putnam to Atlanta and he became President of the NBA's Atlanta Hawks. He then purchased an expansion franchise in the NHL, the Atlanta Flames. Putnam also served as President of the Omni sports complex in Atlanta, and he sold his interests in the Hawks and Flames in September of 1973.

Putnam yearned for more, however, and this is where his buddy Davidson came in. Davidson told Putnam about this WFL venture he was starting up

and said there were plenty of untapped markets available for the right investor. Davidson asked Putnam to join him in his endeavor, and told him to just pick a territory. Like Davidson, Putnam knew that the South was crazy about football. So Putnam looked around and decided on Birmingham, Alabama.

Birmingham was indeed crazy about football, and seemed hungry for more. Legion Field hosted University of Alabama games, and the locals had supported the city's franchise, the Vulcans, of the Southern Professional League in the early 1960s, and the Alabama Hawks of the Continental Football League later that decade. A major producer of iron and steel, Birmingham was often referred to as The Magic City or The Pittsburgh of the South. In 1970, the city had a population of 300,910, making it the 48th largest city in the country. But with no pro teams to root for, and very little interest from the NFL on the horizon, Birmingham, to paraphrase Hank Williams Jr., was ready for some football.

Putnam encouraged Carol Tygart Stallworth, a barmaid and secretary whose husband operated several Ryder Trucking companies, to become part owner and president of the franchise. Ms. Stallworth decided to invest some of the family cash into the sports venture.

"Birmingham is billed as the football capital of the South," said Stallworth, "People in Birmingham eat, drink and sleep football. And when Bill got on the phone and found out the Birmingham option was available, well, I had to make a decision. I didn't have time to back out."

When asked what he would name his team, Putnam replied, "Somebody suggested 'Alabama Bears' but we weren't quite ready to formalize on the whole name." Putnam finally settled on Birmingham Americans. But, this being the WFL, even the naming of the team didn't go off without a glitch. The team had chosen Americans as the name but wanted to keep it a secret until they could make a big, extravagant announcement. Unfortunately, the Washington franchise then proclaimed it had chosen Americans. Putnam was forced to announce that his team had already trademarked that name, which spoiled the team's plans for a big hullabaloo to introduce themselves as the Americans.

Despite that little bump in the road, when Putnam got to Birmingham, however, he was welcomed as a conquering hero. Birmingham had hosted some NFL exhibition games, but now thanks to Putnam they had their very own team. Local writers, newscasters and politicians extolled the virtues of Putnam on a daily basis. Putnam met with Park and Recreation Board officials and applied to use 70,000-seat Legion Field on Wednesday and Thursday nights from July through November. After a tour of the stadium, Putnam said, "We were very impressed." The two sides agreed on a lease.

However, more glitches cropped up. Vince Costello, an assistant coach with the Bengals, was chosen as head coach / general manager. Costello and Putnam had agreed on terms, "but," Putnam said, "Vince called me and said he had been offered the Miami job. I didn't stand in his way." Putnam interviewed five other candidates for the job, and then settled on Jack Gotta, head coach of the Ottawa Rough Riders of the Canadian Football League, and two-time CFL Coach of the Year.

"Bill Putnam contacted me and asked if I would like the opportunity to coach in the World Football League," said Gotta, "I was happy for the opportunity. I had spent nine years as a player in Canada and nine years as a coach, but Birmingham is football crazy. This is football country and everyone is behind us."

Gotta put together a solid squad of veteran players, including quarterback George Mira ("I've played behind the best in the business," Mira joked about his career of being a backup to Johnny Unitas, John Brodie and Bob Griese), wide receiver Dennis Homan, running backs Paul Robinson, Joe Profit and Charley Harraway, center John Matlock, offensive tackle Paul Costa, guard Joe O'Donnell, defensive linemen Bob Tatarek and Clarence Washington, linebacker Ross Brupbacher, and safety Larry Willingham.

The Americans were also able to sign a lot of top notch rookies, including guards Jim Kregel from Ohio State and Buddy Brown from Alabama, linebacker Steve Manstedt from Nebraska, and linebacker Mike Truax from Tulane. Another rookie the Americans signed was Ronald Foxx from Alabama A & M. Foxx quickly found out that due to the smaller roster numbers, WFL players had to be versatile. Due to Foxx's natural athletic skills, Gotta would wind up using the rookie at wide receiver, tight end, halfback and linebacker. "I played so many positions I wasn't able to concentrate on one," Foxx lamented. Gotta's team was a solid unit that *The Sporting News* picked to win their division and go to the World Bowl.

"Guerin Up," to get it done

Back in the day when the NFL college draft lasted 17 rounds, the joke circulating around was that by the 17th and last round, a coach or GM would draft his mother just to get the darn thing over with. In the 1974 WFL college

draft, Birmingham selected 42-year-old retired NBA player and former Atlanta Hawks head coach Richie Guerin in their last round, drawing laughter from the audience.

Putnam also made a big push to sign NFL talent to what were referred to as "future contracts."

"This is the entertainment business," Putnam told the press, "and you have to spend money, money for talent and money for advertising, in order to make money."

These "future contracts" were contracts signed with NFL players still under contract and that would take effect when their current pacts ended. In short order he was able to sign Raiders quarterback Kenny Stabler, Steelers defensive end L. C. Greenwood, Lions wide receiver Ron Jessie, Falcons tight end Jim Mitchell, and Cowboys standouts Mike Montgomery, Jethro Pugh and Rayfield Wright.

Stabler especially was quite a coup, and meant a great deal to the WFL. The "Snake" had played for the Crimson Tide and was still considered a local hero. His signing was accompanied by a press conference during which he was given a hero's welcome and said he was glad to be out from under what he called the "NFL hammer," which he said dictated to a player, "You're going to play professional football here or go out of the country and play it."

The mayor greeted him and a police motorcade escorted Stabler to Birmingham's minor-league baseball park, where he signed what seemed like an endless stream of autographs. In Selma, Stabler posed for photos and did newspaper and TV interviews all afternoon. Most importantly, Stabler's signing caused Birmingham's season ticket sales to jump 1,000 ahead of schedule.

"If I can do for the WFL what Joe Namath did for the AFL," said Stabler, "I will feel that I have really accomplished something. I was born in the South, and raised in the South and played football in the South. Oakland could have offered me as much money as Birmingham but they couldn't have let me play in the South. We didn't give the Raiders a chance to make any kind of counter-offer, but I don't think they could have done anything to change my mind."

But while the "future contracts" gave the franchise—and the league—a much-needed shot of good publicity and seemed to give the NFL the impression that the new league meant business, they eventually helped cause the downfall of the league. The Americans were a prime example of this.

While the team did well financially, the ridiculously huge signing bonuses paid out for all these future contracts put a tremendous strain on the Americans' coffers. Stabler was to receive a $100,000 signing bonus, which the Americans only paid on $70,000. Ron Jessie was paid a $45,000 signing bonus, while Pugh and Wright each received a $75,000 bonus. Greenwood received a $50,000 bonus to sign. Because of this rash and shortsighted spending spree, the Americans, like other teams in the league, also felt the money pinch by the end of the season.

Putnam had already exceeded his original budget, which called for spending only $400,000 in bonuses. "That figure was shot to hell because there were so many more NFL players available than we thought," he said. It seems that nobody told Putnam that just because the players were available didn't mean he had to sign them! Putnam claimed he invested some $900,000 to lure top players to Birmingham.

"We've had a successful year at the gate," Putnam would say later in the season, "We took in approximately $2.3 million. That would leave us only $300,000 short of operating the club, but we've paid out $1.2 million in bonuses to future players. The mistakes I made were picking 1974 to start and paying out all the bonus money."

The franchise wound up with some egg on its face when they announced that they had reportedly sold almost 20,000 season tickets. That was until a plea for new investors revealed that only 7,200 had been sold. That news caused some negative reactions. Jack Gotta said angrily, "All I know is what I read in the papers. I told a civic club in Birmingham we'd sold 20,000 tickets. This makes me look like a jackass. Publicity gimmicks are one thing, but deceit is another. Something like this, where there's deceit, is not right. Things like that can harpoon your program."

Money became such an issue that in June Putnam was forced to ask some of his Atlanta pals to help financially prop up the team. The original four investors, who between them put up over $1.5-million, were Cecil Day, Lon Day, Jay Donnelly, and Erv Plesko. Putnam had to convince the city that he was not about to pull the rug out from under it and move his team.

"It does not mean we are about to fold or that we are thinking about moving the franchise somewhere else," Putnam announced, "It's Birmingham's team." But at the same time, an unidentified team spokesman said, "Should the problem become insurmountable, there are plenty of cities looking for a WFL team, including Phoenix, Louisville, Charlotte, and New London, Ontario, which has offered to build a stadium. There would be no trouble relocating the franchise."

Despite the rumors, innuendoes and veiled threats, the team stayed in Birmingham. So, along with the rest of the league, the Americans' opened the Wiffle's inaugural season on July 10th, 1974. The opener was against the Southern California Sun and drew a crowd of 53,231 to Legion Field, a record for a first-year team, besting the 42,000 set in 1960 by the Dallas Texans of the AFL. The 53,231 figure was the official announced attendance, which included free ticket distribution. The reported paid attendance figure was actually 43,031 for the game.

The Reverend Hugh W. Agricola, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Birmingham, Ala., delivered the invocation before the opening kickoff, praying, "Grant to these teams who are meeting here for the first time the zeal, energy and ability to make a contest worthy of this Football Capital. May the Sun of California never go down upon the wrath of Americans."

Southern California led 7-0 after three quarters, but as would become their trademark, the Americans, true to Rev. Agricola's word, showed the zeal, energy and ability to rally for 11 points in the last quarter and edge the Sun, 11-7.

Running back Charlie Harraway, the ex-Redskin who helped pace a strong rushing attack, said, "The Birmingham opportunity answered a lot of prayers I have said about things in my life. It was meant for me to come here."

Wide receiver Dennis Homan grabbed 3 passes for 50 yards, and said he was once a hell-raiser but no more. "How can you be a witness for Christ holding a beer in your hand?" he asks. "I poured all my booze out. I know I got that garbage disposal drunk."

A 50-yard interception return by rookie safety Steve Williams from Alabama finally put the Americans in the lead 8-7 in the last quarter. "I just took a gamble," said Williams, "Sometimes you have to do it. I read the quarterback and took off."

The size of the crowd and the win had people as giddy as a school girl on "Zac Effron Day." Boasted Head Coach Jack Gotta, "When Tampa and Seattle join the NFL in 1976, they'll be playing with our cuts.

"I feel like this club was in the incubator," Gotta continued, "and that crowd breathed life into it. I say that crowd gave us a start. Now it's up to us. I was tremendously impressed with the support it gave us."

"The crowd is magnificent," added Putnam, "It's hard for me to see 10,000 empty seats!"

But the game had not gone off without a few hitches. The game was delayed 15 minutes. Frank Wagner, Director of the Birmingham Park and Recreation Department, said the game produced more than the usual amount of complaints, which included ticket booths running out of tickets and having to turn customers away; not enough gates being open; the absence of gate numbers on the tickets; tickets that had been sold for seats that had not yet been installed; and concession stands that were often swamped. Fans were still buying tickets in the second quarter. But Wagner said steps were being taken to resolve the issues and promised smooth sailing for the remainder of the home season.

In their first road game, on July 17th, the Americans overcame a 26-point deficit at halftime to win 32–29 over the New York Stars in front of 17,943 at Downing Stadium.

George Mira was held in check the first half and had little support from an anemic rushing attack as the Americans' fell into a 29-3 halftime hole. Birmingham had no first downs in the first half, and had only 12 yards rushing. Mira had completed only 1 of 6 passes for just 8 yards.

Then things turned around after halftime. "Everything started to jell offensively," said Mira of the second half comeback, "everything started to work. Our thoughts were, 'we're gonna come back, we're gonna win this.' All the players on the ball team felt that way."

Mira wound up completing 13 of 22 passes in the second half for 205 yards and three touchdowns. He added another score by keeping it himself and tallying from the 1-yard line.

"When we came back from New York there were people waiting at the airport," said Mira, "and I went home and someone had put a 'Congratulations George' sign on my apartment door."

The second home game, a 58–33 win over the Memphis Southmen on July 24th, drew 61,319 fans. Mira completed 11 of 17 passes for 251 yards and three touchdowns before leaving the game with a sprained ankle. Matthew Reed replaced Mira and hit on 7 of 12 passes for 127 yards and two more TDs. Alfred Jenkins caught 5 passes for 200 yards and three touchdowns.

"Dear Team . . . My name is Alfred Jenkins . . ."

Because he wasn't drafted by any NFL teams in 1973, Alfred Jenkins took the drastic step of writing a letter to each of the 26 NFL teams asking for a tryout. The only team that responded, the Houston Oilers, signed him but apparently did not think that he was much of a football player. At 5'9" and 161 pounds, the

Oilers obviously felt that Jenkins was too small and too light for the rigors of the game. The little receiver from Morris Brown College in Atlanta spent seven weeks in camp with the Oilers in 1973 and was cut. "They didn't give me a shot at wide receiver," said Jenkins, "I just caught punts and kickoffs. I didn't get to catch a punt in a preseason game though. Some good ball players got cut. They ended up with a lot of veterans, which was what they wanted." Jenkins returned to Morris Brown to coach and assumed his pro football playing days were over. But then the Americans staged a tryout camp in Atlanta in the spring of 1974, and Birmingham scout Leonard King asked Jenkins to give it a shot. "It took Leonard three weeks to talk me into getting back out there," said Jenkins, "Then when I got there I saw 350 people and started to turn around and go back. But I finally went out for a return job, but Coach Gotta put me at wide receiver. I thought they would have a stigma about size. I didn't think I'd get a fair shot. But Coach Gotta is a very fair man." Not to mention perceptive. Thanks to Gotta's foresight—and the Oilers lack of it—Jenkins turned out to be a fabulous receiver for the Americans, catching 60 passes for 1,326 yards and 12 touchdowns. At the end of the season, he was named the Americans' Most Valuable Player. When his contract was ruled invalid due to lack of payments, Jenkins signed with the Atlanta Falcons of the NFL. He was one of the league's most dangerous deep threats for the next nine years, catching 360 passes for 6267 yards and 40 touchdowns. In 1981, he caught 70 passes for a league-high 1358 yards, a 19.4 yard per catch average, a league-leading 84.9 yards per game, and a league-leading 13 touchdowns. Pretty good for someone who in 1973 the woeful Oilers thought wasn't big enough or good enough to make it through training camp.

While Mira was recovering from his sprained ankle, Reed started two games and became a huge fan favorite.

On July 31st, in the first of back-to-back games against the Detroit Wheels, Matthew Reed scored the game-winning touchdown with 2:12 remaining in the fourth quarter to secure a 21–18 victory in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Reed had been drafted in the 10th round by the Bills in 1973, but didn't make it out of training camp. While he admitted that his college mechanics were not as good as he would have liked them to be, he was bitter about the fact that mechanics were not really what the pros seemed interested in.

"That's not what they (pro coaches) throw at us," said Reed with a touch of bitterness, "They say that we can't read or recognize defenses fast enough."

Reed was so disgusted with his NFL experience that when the Americans found him, he was, in his words, "running the streets." If Reed had a problem it was that his arm was too strong, particularly for WFL play, since he said he could throw farther at night. "Matthew's gonna concave a chest one day," said Doug Layton, a local Birmingham radio personality.

Against Detroit a week later, on August 7th, in the second of back-to-back games the teams played, a reported 40,367 fans sat in rain and foul weather to watch the game in Legion Field. It looked like they might be doomed to disappointment when the Wheels scored to go ahead 22-20 with a minute remaining. But Birmingham was making the last-second comeback their stock in trade. After the kickoff was run back to Birmingham's 41, Reed hit Dennis Homan for gains of 14 and 19 yards. Next he rolled left and bootlegged nine yards to the 17. Then, with 26 seconds on the clock, Reed rolled left again but this time stopped short and lofted the ball to Jenkins for the winning score.

The Americans' habit of pulling games out in the final seconds was beginning to wear on the team.

"I don't see how we can go on like this," joked Jack Gotta, "I'll never make it through the season like this."

"I'm gonna be 47 years old when this season is over," smiled Dennis Homan.

Owner Bill Putnam was giddy as can be after the win over Detroit. "The WFL's not going to fold," an exuberant Putnam exclaimed. "I'm chairman of the expansion committee and there's high interest in a lot of places. That means there's an outlet for our trouble spots. And as long as we're this successful," he nodded toward the crowd of over 40,000 fans, "somebody in Podunk or someplace is always going to look at us and think, 'Hell, I can do that well.' "

Weather was a factor in the Americans' fourth home game as driving rain delayed the start of the August 14th game against The Hawaiians and held down the attendance to 43,297 fans. The people at Legion Field saw a halftime show featuring grass skirt-clad hula dancers with music provided by the Tuscaloosa High School marching band in addition to a 39–0 victory by Birmingham. Mira, back after missing two games with his bad ankle, tossed two touchdown passes, Jimmy Edwards rushed for 130 yards and a touchdown, Willie Smith returned a punt 81 yards for a score, and

the Americans' defense intercepted four passes. "This team has so much talent," piped up Edwards afterward, "I never played on a team like this."

"All our running backs did well," added Gotta. "We ran with two tight ends and one wide receiver the second half. We may need to use that offense later in the season and wanted to see if we could grind it out on the ground. We finally put things together."

"We're getting better every week," Alfred Jenkins chipped in, "Some people better watch out."

"All the backs were running hard," said Mira, "We ran the ball well."

Prospects appeared to be looking up in Birmingham. The Americans were undefeated and drawing great crowds. Team officials boasted that, unlike other league clubs, the Americans had not resorted to giving away tickets to attract fans. But on August 15th, the Birmingham Park and Recreation Board revealed that those crowds may not have been as great as first thought, and that, despite claims to the contrary, the team had actually resorted to giving away tickets—a lot of them.

The Board, which leased Legion Field to the Americans, received a 10 percent share of the team's gate receipts as part of the agreement. When they received their share of the receipts, the Board announced that the attendance figures for the first three home games had been inflated.

For the July 10th opener against the Sun, the attendance figure, announced at the time as totaling 53,321, was actually 43,301. For the game on the 24th, the Board said the crowd of 61,319 included only 40,367 who paid for their tickets. On August 7th, the Americans said their crowd against Detroit was 56,453. The Board contended that only 33,993 of those folks paid to get in.

Ticket giveaways, of course, were a practice as old as George Halas himself, but when crowds included upwards of 23,000 freebies, there were definitely problems, financially and credibility-wise. The NFL, of course, jumped on these stories like sharks to chum. Any tidbit of bad publicity, especially concerning one of the WFL's supposed solid franchises, was going to get reported.

The Americans travelled to Florida to face the Jacksonville Sharks, 27,140 Jacksonville fans, and the Sharks' new coach, Charlie Tate. Birmingham managed a 15–14 win with a touchdown by Charlie Harraway and action point by quarterback Matthew Reed with 19 seconds remaining in the August 21st game. "Matthew Reed did a super job," Gotta stated, "We also got a lift from Charlie Harraway."

"As long as the Good Lord stays with us," exclaimed Reed, "we'll keep winning."

The Americans defense again had a strong game, holding the Sharks to 12 first downs and 193 yards in total offense.

"We played our best defensive game," offered linebacker Ross Brupbacher. "Outside of those two drives, the first one and the last one, we bottled them up."

It was Birmingham's fifth come-from-behind victory of the season. "I never had any doubts we'd win the game," said linebacker Warren Capone.

"This team is really something," Larry Willingham added, "We win 'em in hurricanes, rain, and the last second, whatever we have to do."

The Americans didn't need to come from behind late when they went north to face the Chicago Fire on Thursday, August 29th, in their first nationally televised game. Birmingham won that match-up 22–8 with 44,732 fans in attendance at Soldier Field. Once again, the defense did a superb job, holding the Fire to only 70 yards on the ground and forcing four turnovers. "It could have been our best defensive effort of the season," explained Gotta, "No doubt about it, this was a big game against a team in our own division and in their own backyard. We played and beat a good team."

Harraway (80 yards), Art Cantrelle (58) and Edwards (57) paced a strong rushing attack as Birmingham won its eighth game in a row. "I got a lot of blocking out there," Cantrelle said, "The offensive line did a great job and opened it for me on the big run. The touchdown run was no problem."

But the game was sloppy and a bit of a rout, much to the dismay of TVS honcho Eddie Einhorn, and also featured six turnovers, including a fumble by the Chicago center.

A quick turnaround found the Americans back home for a Labor Day game against the Eastern Division-leading Florida Blazers on Monday, September 2nd, with 36,529 fans in Legion Field. Birmingham trailed 7-0 for three quarters, but a fourth quarter scoring drive kept Birmingham's winning streak intact with a narrow 8–7 win. The game-winning drive covered 80 yards in 10 plays, the big play a 23-yard scamper by Jimmy Edwards to the four. Matthew Reed then scored from the two, and completed the action point pass to Jim Bishop for the difference in the game.

"Make no mistake about it, Florida came out after us," Jack Gotta said afterward, "They've got a real good football team. We were a bit flat, but I'm not taking anything away from them. Our defense did the job when it had to. It was just another super effort by a bunch of guys who don't know the meaning of the word quit." It

was the sixth time the Americans hadn't quit and had come from behind late in the game to win.

"There's something about this team that makes it rise to the occasion," said guard Joe O'Donnell.

Another short week found the undefeated Americans, who in the words of UPI sports writer Joe Carnicelli, "made the last-minute score almost their trademark," back in action on Saturday, September 7th, at home against the Chicago Fire. Weather was again a factor as Hurricane Carmen pushed torrential rains into the Birmingham area, drenching the field, the players, and the 54,872 fans in attendance. A 34-yard field goal by Earl Sark with less than one minute to go in the game was the difference in Birmingham's 41–40 victory over Chicago. Birmingham held a 38-19 lead entering the last quarter, but three quick touchdown passes by Virgil Carter put Chicago in the lead until Sark's three-pointer.

Although the Americans were one of the better run franchises in the WFL, they did have their share of missteps and foibles. When money started to get tight, Putnam was forced to sell off five percent of the franchise for over $250,000. After he went after some big-name investors, Putnam turned to season ticket holders A. E. (Pee Wee) Burgess (who would be part of the ownership team in 1975), Harry D. Ruffin, William Parker, James B. Price, Max Price, Edwin Ashton and Neal Andrews.

Birmingham Trust National Bank would call in a loan they had made to Putnam for $789,416.99.

As stated, many of these problems stemmed from the huge signing bonuses promised to NFL jumpers which put a drain on the team's coffers. So despite the fact that overall they did well, Birmingham, like the other WFL teams, experienced their share of financial troubles.

Four games in just two weeks proved too much for the Americans as their ten-game winning streak came to an end on September 11th with a loss to the Memphis Southmen. After rallying for seven fourth-quarter comebacks in their first ten games, Birmingham lost 46–7 in front of a 30,675-strong crowd at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium.

"It's a hard thing to say, but it was total defeat," said Gotta. "They ran it when they wanted to and passed when they wanted to. It was one of those nights when nothing went right for us. We got zapped in every department."

Gotta then added, "My old man didn't raise a quitter. We'll get back with it. We're still in first place."

Offensive tackle Paul Costa echoed the sentiments of many around the league regarding the league's Labor Day weekend schedule. "When you play four games in two weeks, you get down mentally," he said, "It's hard to maintain an emotional peak for that many games in such a short span of time."

After their first loss, the Americans cut defensive backs Steve Williams, Drane Scrivener and Cecil Leonard, and defensive tackle Clarence Washington. Signed to take their places were defensive end Jessie Wolf, cornerbacks Gerard Williams and Chris Arnold, and tight end Bob Brown.

The Americans' nationally televised September 19th home game was against "Louisiana," the temporary name for the old Houston Texans who had been taken over by the league and were in the process of being relocated to Shreveport. After struggling against the surprisingly tough "Louisianans" (?) in the first half, which ended with Birmingham ahead by only 15-14, the Americans blew out Houston / Louisiana / Shreveport in the second half to win going away, 42-14.

Mira threw for a WFL-record 380 yards and three touchdowns. "Not too bad for an old man," said "The Matador." Alfred Jenkins, who Jack Gotta said "made some great plays," caught 7 of Mira's passes for 153 yards and two touchdowns, and also caught two action point tries. Dennis Homan, playing despite a painful chest injury, caught 4 passes for 70 yards. Linebacker Jimmy Teal had a solid game with two interceptions, 10 tackles and a sack, but the defense lost defensive end John (Tiny) Andrews with a knee injury for the rest of the season, an injury that already cut into the depleted Americans' defensive depth.

Just 33,619 fans at Legion Field saw the win for Birmingham that kept the team undefeated at home. It was the beginning of a slow, downward trend in attendance figures that coincided with the start of college football season.

As Jimmy Bryan wrote in *The Birmingham News*, "Live by the sword, die by the sword," and that's what happened to the Americans on the 25th of September. Birmingham had won several games with late rallies, but this time the shoe was on the other foot, as the Americans were surprised and upset 26–21 by the Portland Storm, at Civic Stadium. The Storm scored the game-winning touchdown with 35 seconds left. "They beat us at our own game," said Gotta, "We played sloppy when we got ahead, then we relaxed a little and Portland took advantage of it."

Enduring a long flight across the Pacific Ocean did not help Birmingham for their October 2nd game in Honolulu. Birmingham had flown to Portland and now Honolulu on consecutive weeks. The tired and jet-lagged Americans lost 14–8 to The Hawaiians at

Honolulu Stadium, their second straight loss."We've just got to get back to basics now and play all football," said Gotta, "We've got to get back, get together and start over. They made the big play all night and we couldn't make it at all. I'm glad this trip is over needless to say."

Back home, the Americans finally got to enjoy some home cooking, and it showed. Birmingham trailed after the first quarter but rallied to avenge a loss of two weeks before and defeat the Portland Storm 30–8 in front of a below-average crowd of 25,621 hometown fans at Legion Field on October 9th. Mira directed a steady attack and passed for two touchdowns, and the Americans racked up 15 points in the second quarter to bust the game open.

Joe Profit had his best game as an American, rushing 19 times for a game-high 91 yards and a touchdown.

"He really came into his own tonight," said Gotta, "He has really come a long way and is playing like we knew he could."

So was the defense, led by Warren Capone and Ross Brupbacher, which shut down Portland for the rest of the game after that initial drive. Interceptions by Steve Manstedt and Randy Lee helped to set up two of the Birmingham scores. "I thought we pressured Beathard more than we did out there (in Portland)," said Gotta.

The sight of Legion Field being almost three-quarters empty had to be a big concern to not only Putnam and the Americans but the entire league as well, however. Birmingham had drawn several crowds in the 50,000-to-55,000 range and as the season unfolded seemed like the cornerstone franchise of the WFL. But now, like every other team, the Americans were dealing with dwindling attendance figures. These figures were painfully indicative of the direction that the Wiffle was heading, and it was obvious that no one was immune from the effects. It seemed that quite possibly the honeymoon was over and that the novelty of a new league had worn off.

The following week, October 16th, the Americans lost their third game in four weeks, falling 29–25 to the Southern California Sun before a crowd of 25,247 in The Big A at Anaheim. The loss dropped the Americans even further behind Memphis in the Central Division standings, and stuck in the craw of coach Jack Gotta, who placed the blame for the loss on the officiating.

"I will only say that the officials took the game away from our players," Gotta declared, "The key was the pass interference call in the third quarter that gave them a first down on our 19-yard line. They went in to score and take the lead 18-17 and that was the turning point."

In mid-October, Americans team president Carol Stallworth announced that the team's remaining home games would start at 7 p.m. to "make it easier for our early-rising fans" than the original 8 p.m. kickoffs. Also, the Americans' game schedule was adjusted to accommodate the league's shifting and struggling franchises.

The October 23rd game against the Shreveport Steamer originally scheduled for Birmingham was moved to Shreveport instead. In return, the November 13th match-up between the two clubs was relocated from Shreveport to Birmingham. More and more, decisions like this made the Wiffle look like a minor-league outfit. Fluid schedules that changed week-to-week may have been okay for pro football in the 1920s, but this was the 1970s. The fickle fans of the "Me Decade" weren't about to tolerate antics like this, no matter how good the football team. It didn't do the players or team any good either.

Playing on the road unexpectedly, the Americans suffered their only shutout of the season, falling to the Steamer 31–0 in front of 24,617 fans, the team's fourth loss in five games.

"The day of overpowering anybody in this league is over," said Mira, "At the beginning of the season, we were ahead of everybody. But the league has caught up. Football is a game of intensity. You don't play a football game like you practice. The game takes a little something extra, and we're not giving it."

"We don't have any excuse," said Jack Gotta, "but I feel I just didn't get the team mentally prepared to play. Shreveport took it to us, they wound it up."

The October 30th game with the Florida Blazers was moved from Orlando to Birmingham, giving the Americans 11 home games in their 20-game regular season. This was one of two home games relocated out of Orlando as part of a legal settlement between the Wiffle and Blazers' ownership to sell the financially troubled team, pay off debts, and get checks to players who had not been paid since mid-August. Not included in the Americans' season ticket package, this extra home game tallied the lowest home attendance to date for the Americans with 21,872 present at Legion Field. In the game, Mira injured his shoulder in the second quarter and Reed came off the bench to lead the Americans to a 26–18 victory.

Despite the team's success on the field, the franchise's financial situation was shaky. The team was forced to move out of its offices at Legion Field and into a mobile trailer. Putnam had paid out so much money in signing bonuses that he couldn't afford to pay for the teams' operating expenses when the gate receipts declined.

On November 1st, Putnam and Carol Stallworth met with city mayor George Seibels and local businessmen in an effort to raise funds for the WFL team.

Putnam, who owned the majority of the team stock, said the Americans had done well at the gate in their first season but was quoted as saying, "We need a lot more local financing if the team is to remain here another season." Putnam continued, "Before we started the season we said we would raise $1.5 million in local funds. To date we've raised only $150,000." Putnam told reporters that responses from the 28 bankers, businessmen and people attending the meeting with Mayor Seibels were "good," although no immediate solution was reached. Putnam would have to keep searching for local investors to help him finance the team, but it looked like there were few who were interested. Putnam speculated that one reason why he couldn't obtain any local money to invest in the franchise was that local interests were still hoping to bring an NFL franchise to the city.

With no money help on the horizon, Putnam's financial problems continued. In early November, Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley filed suit in Jefferson County Circuit Court for a tax lien against the team's property. The suit sought to recover the $30,000 in state income withholding taxes and more than $57,000 in sales taxes for August and September, plus an undetermined amount for October, that were due to the state of Alabama. The judge ordered Jefferson County's sheriff to "attach the property, real, personal and mixed, of the defendant, wherever it may be in Jefferson County." The team also admitted it owed roughly $14,000 in back sales taxes to both Jefferson County and to the city of Birmingham.

With all of the financial problems hanging over the franchise, there were still games to be played. Birmingham scored all of their points in the first half of their November 6th home game against Philadelphia then fought off a second-half comeback attempt by the Bell to win 26–23 before 22,963 fans at Legion Field. With the victory, Birmingham's 10th straight at home, the team clinched a spot in the WFL playoffs.

Matthew Reed engineered four scoring drives the first half. The rushing game totaled 299 yards as Paul Robinson (77 yards and a touchdown), Cantrelle (55 and a touchdown before leaving with an ankle injury), Harraway (53), and Edwards (45) ran at will. But an interception and a fumble in the second half set up two Philadelphia scores and turned the game into a real battle.

"I thought we played 35 minutes of football," said Gotta, "the first half and then the last five minutes. The first half was as good as we've played this year. We got complacent and made too many errors in the second half, and they really took it to us."

The Birmingham defense tried some different coverages for quarterback King Corcoran and he had trouble picking them up. "Our defensive coaches did a great job putting in some new wrinkles for Philadelphia and it really did confuse them," said Gotta.

The game's highlight, or lowlight depending on your point of view, was an all-out donnybrook that broke out late in the game. Reed took a knee, and a Bell player touched him, bringing the whistle by referee Phil Davidson. But then a Bell player nailed Reed with a shoulder, and suddenly the brawl was on. Fistfights broke out all over the field as reinforcements rushed off both benches to join in, and soon there were several piles of battling players and coaches. Then the players, realizing they couldn't do much damage trying to punch through facemasks, then resorted to kicking each other. It took quite a while for order to finally be restored.

The franchise's increasing financial woes put the playing of the final regular season game in doubt. Before the game, Jefferson County Circuit Court Judge William Thompson granted the state of Alabama a lien against the team's property, including gate receipts, until the delinquent back taxes were paid.

The club managed to work out a last-minute deal with the tax officials and the final regular season game was allowed to go on. The Americans wrapped up their regular season on November 13th with a 40–7 win over the Shreveport Steamer, marking three consecutive home game victories and 11 for the season. "I don't think anyone will ever match our record of 11 wins in one season at home," said Gotta.

Because of doubts as to whether the game would be played persisting until the day of the contest, ticket sales were poor; only 14,794 fans saw the final regular season game the Americans would play. A high school game at Legion Field a couple days before had attracted over 42,000 people. A *high school* game, folks!

The Americans took advantage of five first half turnovers to make easy work of the Steamer. Linebacker Warren Capone, having what he called "the best night of my career, ever," scored a touchdown on a 29-yard interception return and set up two other scores with returns of a blocked punt and a fumble.

Despite the fact that they slumped to a .500 record in the second half of the season, the Americans were still able to finish in second place behind Central Division-winning Memphis at 15-and-5 and earn a spot in the WFL playoffs.

Although the team continued to be a success on the field, financial troubles plagued the franchise. One day after the Americans beat the Steamer in their season finale, the Birmingham motel where the coaching staff had its offices evicted the team for non-payment. By that time, the Americans had not paid their players for five weeks, and their staff and coaches had not received checks in the last two weeks.

Birmingham Mayor George Seibels asked for understanding in the situation, saying, "If the Americans go down the drain, and I'm not saying they will, I think it will do irreparable damage to the possibility of Birmingham getting a professional hockey or basketball team."

On November 18th, the Internal Revenue Service filed its own tax liens of about $237,000 against the Americans and $160,000 against team owner Bill Putnam.

Putnam announced at a press conference that he was trying to raise the funds to pay the team's debts. Putnam asserted what everyone associated with the league already knew—that the team would not be in such dire financial straits if all that bonus money had not been paid for the "future contracts."

Putnam said that he would need to raise $750,000 by November 28th so the team could pay back taxes due to the state, county, and city as well as the salaries of players who had not been paid in five weeks. He said, "If the money comes from Birmingham, we'll stay here but if the money comes from people in Timbuktu who want the team in Timbuktu, then we'll move there."

Putnam said a group from New York was interested in purchasing the Americans.

While the status of the franchise remained uncertain, the team defeated The Hawaiians and Florida to win the league championship.

Their celebration was short-lived. Only days after their championship win, the Americans had every single piece of office furniture repossessed.

Despite the fact that Birmingham had done well at the gate in 1974, Putnam said there was no guarantee the team would remain in Birmingham if there was a WFL in 1975. The lack of local investors was the primary reason.

"Birmingham is a great football city," said Putnam, "The fans are here and pro football belongs here. But it's kinda out of my hands now. I know the Americans have generated a lot of good for the city, but when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, that's as far as it goes. I've looked under every rock there is to look under, and there is simply no significant money forthcoming."

Putnam also went as far as saying there was a behind-the-scenes movement to keep potential investors away. "I think there are people who would like to get rid of us," Putnam said, "I know certain people have put out the word to potential investors. These people want an NFL team, but I guarantee you we have a much better club than an expansion team would be."

In January 1975, a circuit court judge found that the team had not made a payment of the remaining $30,000 due to Kenny Stabler of the $100,000 he was guaranteed for 1974. The judge then ruled that the Americans were in breach of contract and thus Stabler was released from the deal. The three-year contract was to have paid Stabler $100,000 in both 1974 and 1975 while he played out his contract option with the Raiders and $135,000 for the 1976 season when he would have been playing for the Americans. The judge ruled Stabler released from his contract and voided any debt to him by the then-struggling Americans franchise.

The Internal Revenue Service then seized the Americans player contracts and placed them up for auction in March of 1975 to pay the team's $236,691 in overdue taxes. But a judge then ruled that *all* of these player contracts had been breached and therefore were of no value. In any case, the auction was cancelled when a judge ruled that Birmingham Trust National Bank had a valid prior claim to the contracts.

Financially unstable due to reluctance, for whatever reason, on the part of investors, and the short-sighted and lavish signing bonuses paid to lure National Football League players to the new league, the team folded after only one season. Most of the team's assets were seized to pay back taxes. When the team folded both WFL President Chris Hemmeter and a federal judge ruled that the future contracts had all been voided. These players remained in the NFL, playing neither for the Americans nor their successors, the Birmingham Vulcans of 1975.

Bill Putnam and his Alabama Football, Inc., still the legal owners of what little remained of the Americans' assets, made headlines throughout the rest of the 1970s by trying to sue the NFL players he had signed, claiming "breach of contract" to recover the signing bonus money. The players were ultimately able to keep the money after the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in their favor. This kept the team in the headlines long after the WFL was itself defunct.

These headlines clouded the memories of the fact that the Americans were actually a well-run franchise, the biggest draw in the WFL and had won the league's only championship.

CHAPTER 4

Gone to Carolina

The Charlotte Hornets, 1974

"Keep your bags packed, fellows. This may not be the last stop."

—Charlotte defensive end GERRY PHILBIN

The New York Stars were drowning in red ink. The lack of fans at the antiquated and out-of-the-way Downing Stadium made the team feel like they were nothing more than a worm in the Big Apple. Although the WFL planned to place a team in New York in 1976 once Yankee Stadium reopened, that did nothing to help the Stars' current situation. GM Bob Keating told reporters that because of the substandard playing conditions and poor attendance, the team simply could not go on in New York.

Something had to be done.

Then, while they were packing up for their game in Chicago against the Fire, head coach Babe Parilli announced the team was moving to Charlotte, North Carolina, for the rest of the season.

"I still don't believe it," said defensive end Gerry Philbin, "You would think this team could make it in New York.

"They won't let me retire in New York," Philbin added, referring to the fact that the Jets had traded him to the Eagles in '73, "But I need the money so I'll go. But keep your bags packed, fellows. This may not be the last stop."

"We had beaten the Wheels (in New York) and Bob Schmertz asked me to come into his office and he told me that the team was moving to Charlotte, North Carolina, and that we had three days to get down there and get settled," recalled Parilli, "I remember telling the players, at practice, on the field that we had to 'buddy up' and travel down to Charlotte. The guys loved it."

The league had found a buyer in former New England Patriots' executive Upton Bell after Charlotte mayor John M. Belk, a sports enthusiast and owner of a department store chain, helped engineer a deal that made the move feasible. Bell had at first sought to buy the woebegone Detroit Wheels and move that franchise to Carolina, but that deal never materialized.

Bell would take over the GM duties for the team in Carolina, as Stars' General Manager Bob Keating stayed in New York and was not part of the move to Charlotte.

Bell called the city of 250,000 people and the area that included nearly 1-million in population "the last great untapped area for pro football."

"We'd like to be in Charlotte," said Gary Davidson, "It's got good potential . . . the south is very strong on football. But there would have to be a new stadium built eventually."

"Upton Bell didn't have the money to take over the team," recalled Parilli, "He got control of the team from Schmertz, but I don't know how."

As it turned out, the WFL had taken the franchise from Schmertz because he had failed to pay his league assessments. Bell may have had the franchise, but in actuality Schmertz was still technically the owner. When Bell was able to find some financial backing in North Carolina, either Schmertz or the league would be paid off.

Because the move was conducted at the last minute, the team had to come up with a way to quickly hide the Stars logo that included the letters "NY." Team equipment Manager Mike "Tiger" Ferraro came up with an idea. He stuck Chicago Bears "C" logos over the old Stars' logo. This move came to symbolize the WFL—slapping a band-aid on a problem that needed more than first aid.

The Stars—temporarily still their name until a new one could be decided on—played their first game in Chicago and won, 41-30. The Stars scored 23 points in the second quarter and forced four turnovers to whip the Fire and raise their record to 9-and-5, a game behind Florida in the Eastern Division. Quarterback Tom Sherman threw for two touchdowns and ran for another before leaving the game with an injured knee.

"It's kind of hard, almost difficult to make the switch," Parilli said at the time, "But I think we have the type of players who have accepted it. The fact that we're going where we are wanted has inspired them."

A few days later, the team was renamed the Hornets, homage to Civil War soldiers who referred to Charlotte as a "hornet's nest of rebellion." The name was picked out of some 7,000 entrants in a "Name the Team" contest.

Charlotte welcomed the vagabond franchise with open arms. The city gave the Stars a sweetheart lease on Memorial Stadium and long lines were reported at the ticket windows.

"We have sold over 11,000 tickets already," Upton Bell enthused, "Our game this week with Memphis should go very well. The people in both South and North Carolina have greeted us very warmly, especially the business community."

"It's just so much different here," said defensive tackle Greg Lens, "that I can't believe it. Every Pizza Hut has signs out that say, 'Welcome Hornets.' And on the streets the people know us already. We're the only team in town."

"They threw us a parade," recalled Parilli, "Boy, they were hungry for football down there. Playing there was like playing in the Super Bowl. The fans came out, and we got good support. We had great crowds in Charlotte—27,000 fans or so."

The city held the parade for the team on October 8th, the day before their first home game in their new city. Charlotte designated the occasion as "Charlotte Hornets Day."

The team also got rid of their hastily altered helmet logos, replacing them with a more appropriate, and more aesthetically pleasing, block "C."

The new Charlotte club would wind up doing much better in ticket sales than the old team had in New York. In four games at Charlotte, the Hornets would sell over 80,000 tickets, as compared to just 75,000 in their seven games at Downing Stadium.

The team's first home game at Charlotte was a rousing success as the Hornets sold out all 25,133 tickets in their new home of American Legion Memorial Stadium. "They announced a paid crowd of about 25,000 for the first game here," Greg Lens said, "but I bet there were 30,000 people in the stands. They really have welcomed us here."

The game had a definite festival atmosphere, quite a change from the bleak, dreary days in New York and ramshackle Downing Stadium. Helium-filled balloons floated above the stadium. Bands played. Local dignitaries including Mayor John Belk, along with Wiffle glitterati such as Gary Davidson, honored Upton Bell and the new Hornets.

"Outside our win in the Super Bowl in 1970 (while with Baltimore) and the sudden-death playoff game against the Packers," Bell maintained, "my greatest experience in pro sports was opening night against Memphis in 1974. There was no more electrifying crowd than that in pro sports. That game had to be a classic. There was not all the refinements of the NFL, but it was close, down to the wire and was one of the most exciting games I ever saw."

It was indeed an exciting game, but visiting Memphis ruined the Hornets home debut, winning 27-23.

"We got off to a bad start," said Parilli, "It's not the sort of team you can handle if you make mistakes. Someone has offered that perhaps we were tired. Sure, we've done a lot of traveling in relocating, but that wasn't a factor in our loss. We had the game within our grasp."

It was the team's sixth loss of the season, all of which had come by a combined total of only 22 points. "We don't have quitters," added Parilli, "This team will never quit. We'll play it right down to the end."

That was evident when the Hornets fell behind 27-15 but then drove 61 yards behind quarterback Tom Sherman. Don Highsmith plowed over from the one, and then Sherman hit Al Barnes for the action point to narrow the deficit to 27-23.

Charlotte then executed a perfect on-sides kick that George Sauer recovered with 2:16 left. Sherman marched the Hornets down the field and got them all the way to the Memphis 12. But Sherman went to the well one too many times, and his next pass to Barnes was picked off by Dave Thomas of Memphis to end Charlotte's hopes.

The loss didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the Charlotte fans. They gave the team a standing ovation when it came out for pregame drills and another at the end of the game.

A week later, 20,333 fans again rose on several occasions to reward the Hornet defense with a standing ovation as they shut out the Chicago Fire, 27-0, their first goose-egg of the season.

The defense poured in on Fire quarterbacks Bill Cappelman and Bubba Wyche, sacking them seven times, three of them by linebacker James Sims. Defensive end Carter Campbell earned the game ball.

"Campbell turned the tide for us early," said Parilli, "He is so strong that he broke through constantly. He plays with great desire."

"The guys have not been playing good second halves, so I was glad to see this," added Parilli of the shutout, "We urged them to get into shape more. I think (assistant coach) Lamar (Leachman) substituted well on the defensive line."

Don Highsmith, continuing his fine play after being picked up from the NFL waiver wire, scored two touchdowns and rushed for 90 yards.

When Wyche appeared in the game in the second quarter, Upton Bell immediately protested, saying Chicago had no right to use Wyche. The dispersal draft of Detroit players, of which Wyche was one, wasn't scheduled to occur until Friday the 18th, which was still two days away. Bell disagreed with Chicago's use of Wyche, since he felt they had no logical claim to him.

Logical? Since when did the WFL do much of anything logically?

Because of the outcome, the protest by Bell was pretty much meaningless, but it did point out the kind of shenanigans that went on during the Wiffle's first season.

The win over Chicago set up a big Eastern Division showdown—first place Florida, with an 11-and-5 record, against the Hornets, in second place and right behind the Blazers at 10-and-6.

Another good crowd of 23,613 people welcomed the Hornets for the big division showdown. But the team started the game undermanned due to the absence of both its leading rusher Bob Gladieux (thigh muscle injury), and leading receiver George Sauer (bruised shoulder). Then Tom Sherman dislocated his left elbow while scoring an action point and was lost for the rest of the season.

"Sherman getting hurt was a blow," said Parilli, "Sherman was just getting an idea of what to do in there."

The Blazers and Tommy Reamon, who rushed for a league-record 189 yards, 130 of them in the second half, were just too much for the Hornets. Charlotte fell, 15-11. The loss all but mathematically eliminated the Hornets in the division race. It was their seventh loss of the season against 10 wins.

"They outhit us," added Parilli, "We were not as physical. We were at times, but we didn't sustain it. We weren't picking each other up. We weren't together."

Charlotte, after getting 10 first downs in the first half, could get only two in the second half. Their total offensive production in the second half was 29 measly yards.

"That's very poor," lamented Parilli, "a very poor day."

Sub quarterback Brian Dowling was blitzed unmercifully after he replaced Sherman, and the Blazers' constant defensive shifts seemed to befuddle him.

B.D.

Brian Dowling never did much in the WFL, but he was able to make his mark in pop culture, nonetheless. It seems that Dowling was the inspiration for the character "B.D." in the iconic Gary Trudeau comic strip "Doonesbury." Dowling and Trudeau were both students at Yale at the same time in the late 60s.

A week later, Charlotte closed their home season against Southern California. The Hornets had beaten the Sun earlier in the season, 11-8, but picked a bad time to have their worst defensive game of the year. Southern California won 34-23 before 19,436 folks. It was the most points the team had surrendered in a game all season.

The Sun also bottled up the Hornet running game, forcing Charlotte to pass 45 times. Gary Danielson, on the taxi squad a week before the game, completed 12 of 26 passes for only 100 yards in relief of an equally ineffective Brian Dowling. The Hornets were not helped by several mistakes, including center Bob Kuziel snapping the ball over punter Robbie Reynolds' head for a safety, and kicker Pete Rajecki, at 5'9" 180 pounds, being ejected for fighting with Raymond Baylor, all 6'4" 258 pounds of him, of the Sun. That meant Reynolds would have to kick off in Rajecki's place, and he didn't do well as his kicks came up short on several occasions.

The crowd was the smallest of the year, but the fans were so loud that Tom Fears thought they sounded like 119,436. "I couldn't hear the P.A. announcer," said Fears. Earl Gutskey wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that the "Charlotte football fans are the most rabid in the WFL."

On November 6th, the Hornets traveled to Shreveport to face the Steamer. Before the game, Babe Parilli was approached by sheriff's deputies from Caddo Parish, Louisiana, who told him the team could not play the game and that their uniforms would have to be confiscated.

"We hadn't paid our bills," said Parilli, "The sheriff's department came around before the game and said that we couldn't play the game. I pulled them aside and I said, 'Hey, give us the game. Let us play; we traveled all the way down here.' So they waited and after the game took all of our equipment."

The Hornets built a 14-3 lead against the Steamer, but couldn't hold on. Shreveport got over a hundred yards rushing by both Jim Nance and Rocky Thompson and came back to edge Charlotte, 19-14. Charlotte had one last chance to win it with 2:48 left when James Sims recovered a fumble and the Hornets drove to the 28. But Gary Danielson, making his first start of the season, fumbled while scrambling and that ended Charlotte's last threat and any chance the team had of winning the Eastern Division title.

"That's the way it's been all season," said defensive captain John Elliott, "The offense does well and then the defense lets up. Or vice versa. We always seem to come close to winning games, but somehow we end up losing them."

True to their word, right after the game the sheriff's department seized the team's uniforms and equipment. It seemed that a cleaner by the name of Rodney J. Ryan claimed he was due $26,216 for debts incurred when the team was still the New York Stars. Ryan even tried to get some of the gate receipts as well, but those were used to pay off the Steamer players who hadn't seen a payday in a couple of weeks.

Bell said the action was a complete surprise since the bill had been credited to New York Pro Grid, Inc., the corporation that represented the owners of the team when it was in New York. The plaintiffs, however, felt that Bell remained liable for the money.

The players worked out in shorts until team owners posted a bond for the uniforms in time for the next game—"We paid the bill and later got all the stuff back," recalled Parilli—but not before the team became the butt of a number of bad jokes, including one that the Hornets would be reduced to only two plays from now on—a naked reverse and a naked bootleg.

The Hornets had their uniforms back in time to finish the season in Memphis, but the game was a microcosm of the team's season. Charlotte played an error-prone game, didn't capitalize on any mistakes presented to them, and showed once again that they couldn't come up with a big play to win or prevent one by the opposition.

"I'm a little tired of making excuses, but we are still making those mistakes," said Parilli, "We make mistakes and until we eliminate the mistakes, we're not as good a football team as we can show."

The Hornets turned the ball over six times, including four interceptions. Tom Sherman, thought to be out for the season with his dislocated left elbow, had responded quicker to treatment than first thought and got the starting nod. He completed 16 of 27 passes for 133 yards but had the four picks. Also back in the lineup was Bob Gladieux, out since September 6th with a bad knee. He rushed 8 times for 17 yards, as Parilli was obviously tuning up for the upcoming playoffs. But Charlotte found itself on the short end of a 28-22 score, its fourth loss in a row that had turned a solid 10-and-6 record into a mediocre 10-and-10 one.

Off the field, the financial situation was not much better. Despite the improved attendance figures in Charlotte the team was struggling financially. Bell was still scrambling to get more financing; he wasn't any closer to finding financial help than he had been in September. A public stock offering hadn't attracted any investors, either.

Bob Schmertz, owner of the team while it resided in New York, was expecting a large down payment on the sale of the team. The sale was to have been completed on September 2nd.

The players had not received their regular paychecks since the third week in October. Upton Bell said he had checks written for the players and stashed in his desk drawer, but said he was waiting to cover them with funds from the Memphis game and other potential revenue.

The Holiday Inn South was clamoring for repayment of over $13,000 in debts. Printing, advertising, transportation and utility companies were also beginning to ask for delinquent payments. An inspection of bank receipts showed that Charlotte had assets of $94,750 and liabilities of $2.5-million.

"Our players never had a problem, except when Upton Bell took over the team and moved it to Charlotte," said Babe Parilli, "All the players took a pay cut to save the franchise."

Although Charlotte finished in second place with a 10-and-10 record, and were originally scheduled to play Florida in the playoffs, slow advance ticket sales left them without enough money to travel to Orlando for their first-round game against the Blazers. John Bassett had to call Upton Bell and tell him the game had been scrubbed. Bell opted to suspend operations while he put together more financing. The Philadelphia Bell, who finished third with a 9-and-11 record, took the Hornets' place in the playoffs.

"When the WFL season ended, we finished 10-and-10 and beat out Philadelphia for second place," recalled Parilli, "We were supposed to be in the WFL playoffs but we couldn't afford to fly to Orlando to play the Blazers. The WFL worked out a deal where the Philadelphia Bell would go to Florida.

"The WFL was a great football league, and I've been in six of them," Parilli added, "The WFL was very much like the USFL. There were good players and I think we had young stars, veterans and a lot of exciting other players."

CHAPTER 5

Reduced to Ashes

The Chicago Fire, 1974

"We were down in Memphis, and our pregame meal was cold cheese sandwiches. We kind of got the idea that the league was in trouble."

—Chicago Fire wide receiver JACK DOLBIN

The Chicago franchise didn't stay in Nick Mileti's hands for very long. He was just waiting for the right guy to come along, and that guy was Tom Origer, who had started in the construction business in 1962 and now had enough multi-family apartment houses in the area to keep him busy and wealthy. "I was smart enough to start shopping around for a pro franchise after I had made a couple dollars," Origer joked.

Origer met with Mileti on the West Coast and took the Chicago franchise off his hands for a little over $400,000, making him the first owner in the WFL to actually pay for his franchise.

Origer then wasted little time getting himself organized and establishing himself in the league. He was the first owner to sign a professional player—Bears' wide receiver Jim Seymour—and the first to hire a head coach—Jim Spavital from the Winnipeg Blue Bombers of the CFL. He was able to lease Soldier Field and said he was ready to pump about $4-million into his new franchise. Unlike many owners in the WFL, Origer could obviously talk the talk *and* walk the walk.

After rejecting a suggestion to name the team the Chicago Bootleggers (what would their helmet logo have been, a cartoon of Al Capone?), someone else came up with the "Chicago Mob." When he heard that name, Origer quickly decided that the team would have to sign L.S.U. linebacker Warren Capone, for promotional reasons if nothing else. But Origer finally settled on the "Fire," and Capone went to Birmingham, probably safe in the idea that he wouldn't need to dress in a fedora and pin-striped suit, smoke a cigar and carry a Tommy gun in some promotional ad. "It's a strong name," Origer said of the name Fire, "it's Chicago, it's a name with promotional handles."

Although they would be sharing Chi-Town with the Bears, Origer and the Fire had confidence they could compete in the Windy City. The Bears hadn't won a title since 1963 and the franchise's ineptitude had resulted in a won-lost record of 20-49-1 since 1968. Chicago football fans were turned off by the constant losing, and Origer felt this climate would welcome a new team. He envisioned a Cubs—White Sox type of rivalry.

Origer named himself general manger and hired Al Lange as his executive vice president, stating that "I'm going after anybody I think can help us." The two of them then made news on February 8th, 1974 when they signed former Bears and Bengals quarterback Virgil Carter to a 3-year $100,000 contract. Carter was the first legitimate star to sign with the Wiffle.

Carter's career didn't look destined for stardom when it began. In 1967, he spent the whole season on the Bears' taxi squad and didn't play a minute. In 1968, he finally got a shot midway through the season. All of the Bears' quarterbacks had been injured, so Carter was activated and started four games. The Bears won all four. In the fifth game, Carter suffered a fractured ankle. He was done for the year.

But he was a fan favorite, the undersized kid in the era of the big quarterback. The next fall, however, his opportunity didn't come until the 12th game of the season. And then it only lasted six quarters, before a rookie named Bobby Douglass took over, and Carter sounded off in the press.

He not only sounded off, he called George Halas, the venerable Papa Bear, "chickenshit." That's right, baby-faced, soft-spoken, highly-educated, well-liked Virgil Carter called the legendary George Halas "chickenshit." A million frustrated Chicagoans, who were watching their Bears endure a pathetic 1-and-13 season, cheered.

The following Tuesday, Carter was fined $1,000 and suspended. The next season, Carter was no longer a Chicago Bear.

That didn't bother Carter. He was sent to Cincinnati, and as Bear fans suffered with a couple guys named Jack Concannon and Kent Nix at quarterback, Carter was leading the third-year Bengals to the 1970 AFC Central Division championship. He did just fine with the Bengals over the next three years, despite some injuries, and was the NFL's most accurate passer in 1971 with a 62.2 completion percentage.

Carter missed all of 1973 when he broke his collarbone with a minute and 40 seconds to go in the exhibition season. He and his broken collarbone spent that fall in the mountains of Utah, with his wife, Judy, and their infant son, Chad. For a time, they lived without a telephone, a television or a clock. "I had to go out to the car to see what time it was," Carter said.

It was time to make a change, a time to take a gamble. Carter had played out his option while sitting in the mountains of Utah. The NFL didn't have much to offer. He was ready to try the World Football League.

"I knew Virg was perfect for Chicago," Origer recalled. "I used to be a Bear fan, and I was damn upset when they got rid of him. I thought he was better than Douglass, Concannon and whoever else they had.

"Chicago fans really relate to him because he was the underdog with the Bears, and he never really got a shot. But now that he's an established quarterback with a good NFL track record, they know he's good. He's our bread and butter."

"I was contacted by Origer" recalled Carter, "we talked and I made a trip to Chicago to see what he was interested in and we talked about everything right from the ground floor. I thought he was a good guy. I liked him. He was salt-of-the-earth, from a construction background, not pretentious, but had a lot of money."

From Coal Cracker to Chiropractor . . .

One of the receivers Carter would be throwing to was Jack Dolbin, the typical Wiffle player, technically a rookie but who had bounced around the minor leagues for a couple years. After an injury-marred career at Wake Forest, including a senior year in which he only played three games due to a broken ankle, Dolbin went undrafted by the NFL and got few free agent offers. He then got a call from Ron Waller, head coach of the Pottstown Firebirds, who told Dolbin, "Give me a year, and I'll teach you how to play wide receiver." Dolbin signed in 1970 for $300 a week, $300 more each time the team won three games in a row, and a $500 bonus. "Back in the 70s, teams were allowed to have a taxi squad," Dolbin recalled, "and the Eagles taxi team was sent to Pottstown every week to play minor league football. The idea was that you would get these five or six guys some experience. A lot of the guys on that team were very similar to me. Maybe judged an inch too short or a step too slow or maybe they had circumstances in college—as I did with injuries—where they just didn't get drafted." Waller was true to his word, turning Dolbin, who had been a running back at Wake, into a Kyle Rote / Howard Twilley type of receiver—a combination of good speed, good moves and great patterns. His performance in 1970 earned him some interest from the Chargers and the Jets, but that interest didn't turn into a contract. Dolbin wound up playing for a team called the Schuylkill Coalcrackers in his home town of Pottsville. "The second year I played for the Coalcrackers," remembered Dolbin, "which was actually a couple steps below Pottstown." After that, his football career seemed to grind to a halt. "I was out of football for two years," Dolbin recalled, "I had decided to go to chiropractic college [*his father and grandfather were both chiropractors*], and the NFL had re-structured their taxi squad system so there were no longer minor league teams available. I had given it two years and didn't get any offers, so I went to chiropractic college in Chicago. I was working for J.C. Penney's as a security guard, chasing shoplifters for a living." Dolbin and his family were living in a $90-a-month apartment to try to get by. Then the Fire and the Wiffle was formed, and a scout for the Fire who had seen Dolbin play in college knew he was living in Chicago and got him a tryout with the team. "I didn't have contact lenses at the time," said Dolbin, "and I was wearing glasses. My wife loaned me her contact lenses which were pretty close to my prescription." Dolbin was one of 300 at the tryout, and ran a 4.3 40-yard dash. "So automatically I

caught some of their attention," Dolbin recalled. He was named one of 5 players of the 300 invited to training camp.

With that money, Origer signed other veterans such as offensive tackle Steve Wright, linebackers Rudy Kuechenberg and Ron Porter and running back Cyril Pinder. Origer also made overtures to NFL veterans like Bears' linebacker Doug Buffone and Packers' running back John Brockington. Unlike his fellow owners, however, Origer showed some good sense and restraint when it came to signing players. When Brockington asked for $1-million to sign for three years, Origer said no thanks. "I just don't think any player is worth what Brockington was asking," said Origer.

Origer also used his money to sign quite a few draft choices as well, including running backs Mark Kellar and Clayton Heath, kicker Chuck Ramsey, and defensive end Mick Heinrich.

"Tom was a straight forward guy," recalled Kellar, "He treated me well, and paid me every penny I was owed. He was a good businessman and had enough money to run the team the right way. He represented us well, spoke well. We had nice offices. Tom hired good people to run the team."

One of those good people Origer approached about working for the Fire was former Bears' running back Gale Sayers, but Sayers said he was not ready to leave his post as assistant athletic director at Kansas.

Must Have Been Some Three Minutes!!

The Fire had an offensive tackle from Ohio State named Earl Belgrave on their roster. His was an interesting story to say the least. He was the 435th player drafted out of 442 in 1973, selected by the Lions in Round 17. This despite the fact that Belgrave says he played exactly three minutes during his college career. That's right, *three minutes*!! He added that he wasn't even on the Buckeyes traveling squad to the Rose Bowl. "The scouts saw me in practice," said a stunned Belgrave, "I swear to God they didn't see me in games. But they know what's happening."

It's important to note here about the status of the relationship between Origer and Gary Davidson. Davidson himself put it best: "Tom Origer and I did not get along." Origer was unhappy about Davidson's tactics from the day he brought the Fire into the league. They really locked horns when Davidson wanted to try to prop up and save the weaker franchises, while Origer hated the thought of using his money to pay for someone else's mistakes. This would reach a head later in the season.

But at the beginning of the season, all was going well for Origer and his Fire. The team was indeed sparking interest in the Windy City. By the beginning of the season, the Fire had sold 20,000 season tickets. Origer figured all his team needed to do was win and it would be successful. "If we average 30,000 we might break even," the owner said on the eve of the season, "35,000 and we'd have a small miracle. Less than 30,000 and we will have done a lousy job."

"I've never seen something like this put together," Origer told *Chicago Tribune* writer Clifford Terry, "It was spontaneous combustion, like an A-bomb."

Unfortunately, that bomb would eventually blow up in Origer's, and the Wiffle's, face.

At the time, Chicago already had baseball's moody and controversial Dick Allen. It looked like the city might have gained another reluctant hero in wide receiver James Scott. A rookie from Henderson County Junior College in Athens, Texas, Scott had impressed the Fire coaching staff and was penciled in as a starter. But eight days before the opener, Scott suddenly jumped the team. He was not discovered until 6:30 on the morning of the opening game in a motel room in his hometown of Gladewater, Texas. Despite being MIA for eight days, Scott wound up catching 10 passes for 84 yards and a touchdown as the Fire shut out Houston, 17-0 in their opener.

Soldier Field was alive for the game with pyrotechnics, cheerleaders, bands and an announced crowd of 42,000 fans (the total was actually 36,150). The show biz atmosphere impressed the fans, one of which said, "This city can support two teams. I don't dislike the Bears, I just like football." Another fan added in describing the Bears, "We've been bored to tears. There's a complete lack of innovation in the organization. They're stale from top to bottom."

The Fire was anything but stale. Virgil Carter completed 21 of 34 passes for 184 yards and two touchdowns and was named the game's outstanding offensive player. The ground game did well until Cyril Pinder was ejected for fighting with Houston defensive tackle Jim Kanicki in the second quarter. "Kanicki kneed me in the groin. You don't expect that from a veteran like him," said Pinder.

"You can see the difference when he's not in," said Spavital of Pinder.

The crowd might have been the most impressive aspect of the game. "If we can do this well every week, I'll break even. And I'll be very pleased," said Origer.

"I didn't expect a full house when I came here," said Carter, "What with the weather, newness and everything, there just as easily could have been 12,000 out there."

In Week Two, Chicago hosted the Jacksonville Sharks. This time around, 29,508 fans were at Soldier Field. They saw a game full of drama, controversy and white knuckle excitement, the kind of things that Gary Davidson promised America's football fans when he formed the WFL.

The game was tied 22-all with 4:05 left when the Fire started one last drive. Virgil Carter hit tight end Luther Palmer for gains of 12 and 23 yards, and then the Sharks were called for being offside and that put the ball on the Jacksonville 13. Mark Kellar then plowed for four yards. From the nine, with 6 seconds left, Chuck Ramsey nailed a 26-yard field goal to win it for the Fire.

"My right thigh, my kicking leg, had bothered me all training camp," said Ramsey, "It feels better now, though. I was kicking well before the game, and should have made the earlier field goal try."

Kellar made up for his two fumbles of the week before by scoring twice, once on a short run and the other on a 31-yard pass from Carter. "I'm not a speedster and everybody knows that," said Kellar, "They have to time me with a calendar for the 40."

The zaniest play in the game occurred with 6:11 left in the third period. Ramsey was in to try a 20-yard field goal. Snapper Mick Heinrich, normally a defensive end, said he lost his contact lens and got off a poor snap to holder Joe Womack.

In the case of a bad snap, Womack was supposed to yell, "Ice, Ice!," a signal to set up his blockers and then perhaps somehow salvage the play. But because of the noise of the crowd, no one heard him. "The crowd was screaming," said Womack afterward, "So I just took off. Scared? What do you think, brother?" Scared or not, Womack took off and ran into the end zone. The touchdown put Chicago up, 15-8.

The 25-22 victory made the team 2-and-0, and tickets were selling like the proverbial hotcakes!

A week later, the Fire spoiled the home debut of the Portland Storm, as Carter threw for three touchdowns and Joe Womack intercepted a pass, blocked a field goal and recovered a fumble in a 29-22 win.

Carter shook off a slow start to go 10 of 18 for 206 yards and three touchdown passes to Mark Kellar, Cyril Pinder and Scott. The touchdown pass to Scott made it 29-14 and clinched the win. Portland scored in the waning seconds to make the score seem closer than it was.

"Our running game was very good tonight," said Spavital, "which helped us after we made so many mistakes in that first half. We were fortunate to win. We'll find out how good we are this weekend in Hawaii."

Playing their second game in five days after a long flight to Honolulu, the Fire definitely did not look any worse for wear, especially Mark Kellar. The rookie from Northern Illinois scored five touchdowns and added an action point for 36 points as the Fire crushed The Hawaiians, 53-29.

Carter did his part, completing 15 of 21 passes for 213 yards and three touchdowns.

The defense, meanwhile, held The Hawaiians to just 21 yards rushing and intercepted three passes. Joe Womack continued his fine play by intercepting two of the passes and returning a punt for 27 yards and a kickoff for 24 more.

The Fire was now one of only two WFL teams still undefeated. Unfortunately, the other was Birmingham, and the two teams were tied for first place in the Central Division. But the Fire looked for all the world like the class of the league. They had scored the most points in the WFL, 124, and only three teams had surrendered fewer points on defense.

Now 4-and-0, the Fire came home to face the Eastern Division-leading Florida Blazers. Florida had a top notch defense, but their offense had sputtered and didn't seem capable of keeping up with the Chicago attack. Sure enough, as 31,193 fans looked on, the Fire scored 21 points in the second quarter to take a 21-16 halftime lead. There wasn't any reason to think there wasn't more from where that came from.

Incredibly, there wasn't any more from where that came from. The Blazers blocked a Chuck Ramsey punt and intercepted a Virgil Carter pass, both of which they returned for quick touchdowns. The Fire ground to a halt in the second half, and wound up losing, 46-21.

"I told the players afterward, they made every possible mistake they could," said a bedraggled looking Spavital, "I blame myself. I let them down. Perhaps it took too much out of them, getting psyched up for two games so close together on the West Coast. I don't know. You name the mistakes, we made them."

Mark Kellar gained a season-high 87 yards, but also fumbled twice. "I hope coach isn't planning a hard practice; that would be a big mistake," the rookie cautioned, "We're not in high school anymore. We made big mistakes, but we know how to correct them."

"I've never been on a team that could stay sharp all the time," said veteran linebacker Ron Porter.

The Fire were sharp a week later, rebounding to win their fifth game in six starts by edging the Bell,

32-29 on Virgil Carter's 11-yard touchdown pass to Jack Dolbin with 1:29 left. "It was a post pattern," said Dolbin, "I was actually the third receiver. I just got free, and Virg hit me."

"The Bell had an obvious weakness with their linebacker coverage, and we took advantage of it," said Carter, who marched the Fire 80 yards to the winning score.

The Fire almost left too much time on the clock, allowing King Corcoran to work some of his magic. The King moved the Bell into Chicago territory, but Joe Womack sealed the win with an interception with under a minute left.

Cyril Pinder, finally playing a full game after battling several injuries, led the Chicago running game with 151 yards on 18 carries. "It was long overdue," said Pinder, "I know people have been waiting to put the rap on me, but some people ought to try playing with muscle pulls. Then they'd know how I feel. I haven't been feeling too well, and this is the best I've felt in six weeks. I was ready to go."

Mark Kellar added 112 yards and a touchdown on the ground, as Chicago amassed an impressive 275 yards rushing. The Fire running game was so good, in fact, that Carter seemed to abandon his passing game for the most part. He tried only 19 passes, completing 11 for 104 yards. "We were running so well, why pass?" Virgil said afterward.

When the team got to Ypsilanti to play the Wheels a week later, they found out that they had to dress for the game in a motel on campus. It was discovered that locker room space at Rynearson Stadium had been taken over by the Eastern Michigan football squad that was in the midst of preseason workouts.

The Wheels announced the crowd as being 10,300, but observers were even skeptical of that count. Wide receiver Jack Dolbin joked, "There were more people here when we scrimmaged the Wheels in June."

Carter completed 11 of 16 passes for 149 yards, Kellar and Pinder each scored twice, and the Fire won its sixth game in seven tries, 35-23 over the winless Wheels.

The highlight of the game, however, was a 90-yard kickoff return by Walter Rhone of the Fire that made the score 21-8 and took what little air was remaining out of the Wheels.

"It was the easiest kickoff return of my life," said Rhone, who at first fumbled the kick, but that just helped set up his blockers, "Regardless of what people say, we have a good specialty team. We had wanted to save something like this for Birmingham. But we have another surprise for them."

The play of the Wheels reflected their dire situation and constant rumors of the team moving to Charlotte or Louisville. "I can imagine how those guys feel," said a sympathetic Carter.

The Fire didn't feel much better a week later. On Thursday, August 29th, the 6-and-1 Fire faced off against the 7-and-0 Birmingham Americans in a battle for first place in the Central Division. The matchup drew 44,732 fans to Soldier Field and a national TV audience. But the Fire was held to 70 yards rushing and turned the ball over four times and lost to Birmingham, 22-8.

"We had wanted to do what we normally do," said Spavital, "But they took everything away from us. Losing Pinder midway in the second period didn't help."

Pinder carried only three times before he twisted his left ankle after catching a 38-yard pass from Carter.

Virgil had his problems all night, completing just 18 of 43 passes.

"Both their outside linebackers were up on the line and the middle linebacker was up close," said Carter, "I didn't test it much, but when I did, they were right there." Birmingham also used a safety blitz which kept Carter scrambling for receivers and caused several of his passes to sail off-target. At least two of his passes were deflected. Quite a few others were dropped.

"I wanted to have a good game so badly," said a distraught Dolbin, "I can't explain it. I can't explain anything. All I know is I was dropping passes out there, and I had no excuses."

"I think we have the best receivers in the league," said Spavital, "We must have dropped seven passes out there. Two receivers leading the league, and all of a sudden they start dropping them."

The defense played one of their better games of the season, but spent a lot of time on the field and it showed in the latter stages of the game. "The defense played well," offered Spavital, "but it was on the field 80 percent of the time."

"Our defense did the job," said linebacker Rudy Kuechenberg, "But we're a team, and WE lost the game."

"We'll just have to regroup," Spavital concluded.

Chicago would have to regroup quickly, as their next scheduled game was in Anaheim on Labor Day, just four days away.

On Sunday the 1st of September, the team boarded the bus to take them to O'Hare Airport to catch their flight to California. Kicker Chuck Ramsey showed up unshaven, and dressed in jeans and a sports shirt. Jim Spavital reminded him about the dress code, and the

two exchanged words. Ramsey abruptly quit the team. Spavital then suspended the kicker.

Spavital had made a stand, but now the Fire was in a bind. The team had no kicker or punter, and was scheduled to play the very next night in California.

Personnel director Bill Byrne put in a hasty call to a Midland, Pa. steel company and asked for a 28-year-old sales rep named Allen Watson. The Scottish-born kicker was playing for the Youngstown Hardhats of the Midwest Football League after a couple unsuccessful tryouts with the Steelers. Watson hopped on the next plane and arrived in Anaheim on Monday afternoon at 3:30pm. He was rushed into a uniform, booted a 39-yard field goal and handled the punting chores as Chicago upended Southern California, 32-22, to move their record to 7-and-2.

Watson's punts averaged only 31 yards and he said he didn't consider himself a punter, but added in a thick Scottish brogue, "I could learn though. It would just take some work.

"Going to the WFL now is a difficult decision for me," Watson continued, "I have obligations and loyalties to my job in Pennsylvania. You just can't up and leave. I was playing your football on the side. It's more than just money."

The Fire defense stopped the Sun on six straight possessions at one point, and defensive tackle Chuck Bailey sacked Sun quarterback Tony Adams twice. Virgil Carter completed 16 of 29 passes for 232 yards and four touchdowns, and Mark Kellar, who reminded *Los Angeles Times* reporter Earl Gutskey of "a 22-year-old Jim Taylor," provided ground support with 118 yards in 30 carries.

Cyril Pinder watched from the sidelines as his ankle was still not 100%. Joining the team to replace him was Billy Taylor, who had seen action in the CFL and with Memphis.

"It was the toughest, hardest hitting game we've been involved in," said Spavital.

The win over Southern California put the Fire's record at 7-and-2, tying the team for second place in the Central Division with Memphis. Both teams were two games behind the still unbeaten Birmingham Americans. All three squads were playing well, and looked like solid contenders for the league championship. Everyone thought that the division was going to be a three-team race for the title.

But little did anyone know that the Fire was not going to win another game for the rest of the season.

Five days after beating the Sun, Chicago traveled to Birmingham for a showdown with the Americans. The Fire arrived in Alabama just about the time Hurricane Carmen hit the Gulf Coast. The hurricane slammed into the area, and brought torrential rains with it. The Fire and Americans kicked off on Saturday night in a downpour.

But the heavy rains didn't seem to bother the offenses one bit. The two teams combined for 81 points, 10 touchdowns, 33 first downs, and 662 yards in total offense. It was just the kind of high-scoring shootout that the WFL founders had hoped for and promised the public. As Jimmy Bryan wrote in the *Birmingham News*, "Absolutely incredible. Unbelievable. Fantastic. Pick your own adjective." It was all those and more.

The first quarter was fairly tame and ended with Birmingham up 8-0. Then the two teams combined for 31 points in the second quarter, Chicago scoring on two touchdown passes from Carter to James Scott. But the Fire trailed, 23-16 at the half.

Birmingham slowly took control of the game in the third quarter as the heavy downpours continued to pound the two teams and the 54,872 fans at Legion Field. Birmingham scored two touchdowns while Chicago could manage only a 42-yard field goal by the Scotsman, Allen Watson. Late in the third quarter, Chicago found itself in a 38-19 hole.

But not the weather, the score, or the Americans deterred Virgil Carter. Virg the Scourge, as the Windy City press had taken to call him, proved to be a scourge on the Americans and their fans that night. Battling the Americans and the elements, Carter put on a veritable clinic in the last quarter.

The Fire recovered a fumble by Birmingham's Paul Robinson on the Americans' 15 with 29 seconds to go in the third quarter. Carter, scrambling to elude a strong pass rush, found Kellar for a 14-yard touchdown to make it 38-26 at the beginning of the fourth quarter.

On their next possession, Carter marched the Fire 89 yards in 12 plays, five of them passes. A 29-yarder to James Scott put the ball on the Birmingham 9-yard line. After Kellar ran for four, Carter dropped back and hit Scott in the end zone for the score. The action point failed, but Chicago had cut the deficit to just five points, 38-33.

Birmingham ran three plays and had to punt. Chicago took over on its own 33, and Carter, again ignoring the heavy rain which normally would play havoc with any passing attack, proceeded to move the Fire 67 yards in just three plays, all of them passes. He hit Scott for 30 yards, and then connected with Jim Seymour down the left sideline for 38 yards and the touchdown. The action point was again no good, but suddenly, thanks to Virg the Scourge, Chicago had the lead, 40-38 with 2:59 to go.

But Birmingham, a team that had already won six games in the fourth quarter, pulled out another one by maneuvering from its own 43 to the Chicago 16. From there, with 47 seconds left, Earl Sark, who the Fire had traded to the Americans three days before the season, calmly booted a 34-yard field goal to give Birmingham the lead, 41-40.

Carter had some ticks left on the clock to work some more magic. He completed a 12-yard pass to Kellar, but then missed Pinder. Carter dropped back again but this time his pass skimmed off the receiver's fingertips and was intercepted. Birmingham ran out the clock and had won, 41-40, despite a 23 of 43 for 309 yards, five touchdown performance by Carter.

In Week Eleven, against Southern California, with just 6:38 left in the game, Chicago held what looked like a commanding 28-15 lead. Just then, the P.A. announcer at Soldier Field let the crowd of 24,827 know that Memphis had beaten Birmingham. If the Fire could hold on, they would gain ground in the standings. But they couldn't. The Sun scored two touchdowns in the last 4:41 and beat Chicago, 31-28. So instead of moving up in the standings, the Fire fell three games behind Birmingham, with a record of 7-and-4.

"A good team doesn't let things like that happen," said Spavital.

Worse yet, the Fire lost both Mark Kellar and James Scott to season-ending injuries, Kellar to a broken foot and Scott to a knee injury.

To replace Kellar, the Fire signed NFL running back Leroy Kelly on the 17th. The future Hall-of-Famer had been cut the week before by the Raiders.

"I don't look at playing in the World Football League as a comedown," Kelly said, "What brings me to Chicago? Money, dough. The Mean Green, my man, is where it is all at."

A team spokesman said there was a chance Kelly could start against Memphis.

But the injuries and the losses would continue to pile up. The season, it turned out, was just beginning to unravel.

Chicago hosted Memphis on the 18th of September. Before the game, the Fire put on quite a show, playing their fight song while two fire engines, 40 cheerleaders, a band and nine dancing girls cavorted on the field. A siren even sounded during the proceedings.

Unfortunately, the football team couldn't match the pregame festivities in entertainment. As fortunes and the fans continued to turn against Chicago, a crowd of 26,678 people in Soldier Field watched the Fire get dominated, 25-7, their worst loss of the season. As the score mounted against the home team, fans were heard to be booing Virgil Carter and asking for back-up Maurie Daigneau (Maurie Daigneau? Really??) Late in the game, they got their wish unfortunately. Carter threw a pass but on the follow-thru his hand hit Memphis' Fest Cotton in the helmet. He had a broken thumb. With two of their biggest offensive weapons already out, the Fire had now lost their starting quarterback as well. When Carter got hurt, the Fire's season, and any chance they had at being competitive, were all but finished.

"I was throwing a pass and my hand went right into the defender's helmet on the follow-thru, which isn't uncommon," recalled Carter, "Right away I knew I was hurt, but I got through the game alright. It wasn't displaced, it didn't need surgery, and it would only take four weeks to heal. I didn't want to wait four weeks."

Coach Jim Spavital, sounding genuinely angry for the first time all year, said, "I'm tired of calling it rookie mistakes. We simply let them come up with the big third-down plays too often. After 12 games, you're not supposed to be making those kinds of mistakes."

Kelly entered the game late in the first half and was cheered loudly. On his first play he missed a block that allowed Carter to get sacked for a loss of 15 yards. Welcome to the WFL, Leroy.

Memphis rolled up 451 yards in total offense, a figure that didn't sit too well with Fire linebacker Rudy Kuechenberg. "We used the 4-3 (as opposed to their normal "Okie" 3-4 defense) all except the first series," said Keuchenberg, "They sure got a lot of yardage against us. I don't know I just work here. I'm coming back to play football next week, that's all I know."

After the game, the entire defensive secondary was revamped, as three defensive backs, including Hal Phillips and Joe Womack—who was the second leading interceptor on the team—were cut.

Asked what the problem with the team was, Phillips answered mysteriously, "I don't want to tell you. I really don't. I could tell you what's happening with the Fire, but it might be misinterpreted. When things are bad, the people at the bottom of the totem pole catch hell. That happens to be the players."

Shortly after the Memphis game, offensive tackle Steve Wright suddenly announced his retirement, offering no reasons for leaving the team other than to say he preferred scuba diving in Florida than banging heads with the Wiffle's defensive tackles.

On his way out the door, Wright quipped bitterly that he had been offered a million dollar contract: "A dollar a year for a million years!"

Carter tried to play a week later against Florida. "I wanted to play against Orlando," said Carter, "and I talked to the trainer and came up with a way to do it. I thought I could outsmart Mother Nature and tried it and it didn't work."

The once potent Fire, shooting blanks now that seemingly half their offensive weapons were out with injuries, were shut out, 29-0 by the Blazers. Carter tried to play but left late in the first quarter after he threw an interception. "Virg should be ready next week," Spavital moaned, "We'll be looking at his finger again to determine how bad it is. But he should be back . . . My God, I hope he can come back."

With Carter on the sidelines, the Blazers were able to key on the beleaguered Chicago running attack. Florida held Chicago to 99 yards on the ground, 87 of those by Leroy Kelly, who was the Fire's only consistent weapon. The closest Chicago penetrated into Florida territory was the 14, but a sack of back-up quarterback Leo Hart, who completed only 9 of 22 passes in relief of Carter, killed that drive.

After the game, Spavital promised more changes for his faltering team, especially in the defensive backfield. He singled out Walter Rhone and Randy Richardson for criticism in the locker room, and said he planned to look at new people, a plan of action that was beginning to grate on some of the veterans.

"We've got to continue to better ourselves," Spavital maintained, "We'll probably make some more moves."

The loss dropped Chicago's record to 7-and-6. Origer told reporters he thought the league should kick both the Shreveport and Detroit franchises out of the league and then re-align into a two-division circuit with five teams in each division.

"We'd have a chance to make the playoffs that way," Origer mused, "But if we're 7-and-13, it won't make much difference will it?"

Next on the schedule was supposed to be the New York Stars, but during the week that franchise announced it was moving to Charlotte, North Carolina. The team came into Chicago as the Charlotte Stars, with orange Chicago Bears' "C" decals on their helmets to hide their old logo. It looked as bad as it sounded.

The team looked better than their helmets did, however, and clobbered the Fire, 41-30, Chicago's fifth loss in a row.

The Fire signed NFL veteran Bill Cappelman a few hours before game time and immediately threw him to the wolves, figuring he couldn't be any worse than anyone else they had. He wasn't, but he wasn't any better either. Cappelman, playing his first full game since his pro debut with Minnesota in 1970, completed 9 of 23 passes for 200 yards and was picked off twice.

Leroy Kelly rushed for 91 yards, his best game since 1973, and Pinder added 72, but four turnovers and six costly penalties wiped out any chance the Fire had.

"We got a lot of young guys and they're going to get better," said Kelly, "I hope the fans will stick by us."

The fans might have been sticking with them but it looked like their owner wasn't. Origer's frustrations with the Wiffle in general and Davidson in particular reached the boiling point after the game. His team's five-game losing streak may have been sticking in his craw as well. But what set Origer off more than anything else was being assessed a $60,000 fee to help the financially floundering Detroit Wheels. Origer believed that Davidson and his pals were wasting too much money and someone had to take a stand. That someone was him.

Origer told Robert Marks of the *Chicago Tribune* that Davidson simply wanted the "up-front money" for league franchises. "Anybody who can scrape up $250,000 gets a franchise in the league," Origer claimed, "They cared more about that than they cared about themselves." Origer also called into question Davidson's integrity regarding background checks for potential owners and investors and called for Davidson's immediate resignation.

"I'm obviously in business because I expect to make a living out of it," the commissioner responded, "But I am more concerned with the success of the league than any immediate money I make."

Davidson took issue with Origer's claims that background checks were not done. "You don't always get the best owner on the basis of a bank statement," said Davidson, "We knew some of the owners were weak, and we tried to help them.

"Tom has been involved long enough to know that there are enough pressures in the league right now that we don't need any problems created by internal disagreements," continued Davidson, "Tom and I agree on most things but he tends to make public statements that mislead people and hurt the league."

"Tom and I have great rapport," the commissioner insisted. He added that although he considered Origer a friend, "We yell and scream at each other at times." Then Davidson, sounding like Yogi Berra, went on to say, "I have no trouble communicating with Tom, except I don't understand him."

Davidson refused to speculate on what, if any, Origer's punishment might be. "I am used to being shot at," said Davidson, "I don't react to it as much as I used to when I was younger. I gave up fighting when I turned 40."

By now, Chicago had the worst defense in the league. After 14 games, they had surrendered 381 points, the most in the WFL and an average of a little over 27 points a game. No matter how good your offense might be (and thanks to the rash of injuries the offense just wasn't much good now either), that's not going to win you many games. No matter what the team tried nothing seemed to work. They moved players around and cut some and brought in new ones. In fact, the team was trying out new players as though it was still training camp. As tackle Steve Wright said before he left, "Our locker room looked like a bus station."

Nothing the Fire tried could stop their opponents. The 3-4, the 4-3, the "Okie," the "Hokey Pokey," nothing worked. Finally, on October 8th, Chicago canned defensive coordinator Jim Crossland.

The next night, the Fire showed that maybe it wasn't Crossland's fault after all. Even without Crossland to guide them, the defense continued to look helpless, and the team lost 45-17 to Florida, the team's sixth loss in a row and third of the season to the Blazers. The three losses had been by a combined score of 120-to-38. The Blazers scored 30 points in the fourth quarter and even running back Tommy Reamon got into the act by throwing a 60-yard halfback option pass to Matt Maslowski for a touchdown. The Fire didn't sack the Florida quarterbacks once, and gave up 369 yards in total offense.

The Chicago offense, meanwhile, turned the ball over five times and Bill Cappelman completed only 10 of 36 passes before being mercifully pulled for backup Leo Hart.

Besides all the trouble on the field, the franchise now got themselves in hot water with the league. When the Detroit franchise had been folded by the WFL, the Fire, desperately needing help at quarterback, signed ex-Wheels signal caller Bubba Wyche. But both the Philadelphia Bell, which held the negotiating rights to Wyche, and the league, which hadn't even held a dispersal draft of the Detroit players yet, had a problem with this.

Shortly before their next game, in Charlotte, the team received a telegram from the league office ordering them not to play Wyche. Because of a court receivership of the bankrupt Wheels, the WFL said, Chicago should not activate him. Origer must have considered the telegram nothing more than toilet paper. Having already bumped heads with Davidson so much that his forehead was sore, Origer contended that Wyche had become a free agent when the Wheels failed to pay him within 72 hours of a scheduled payday.

Sure enough, with six minutes left in the first half and Chicago trailing 8-0, Wyche got into the game, replacing Bill Cappelman and completing 8 of 14 passes for 137 yards. As soon as Wyche stepped on the field, Charlotte president Upton Bell immediately filed a protest with the league office. The Fire lost the game, 27-0, Charlotte lost its protest, and after the Fire worked out some compensation with Philadelphia, they were allowed to keep Wyche.

Origer, crippled by both heavy financial losses and a losing team on the fast track to nowhere, then stunned those at a league meeting by claiming he would rather fold his franchise after the following weeks' contests. He urged his fellow owners to just end the season after Week 17 and let Memphis and Birmingham play for the league championship. The other owners panicked, reeling at the idea of losing another franchise, especially the team in one of America's largest media markets. Three of the strongest owners—John Bassett, Sam Battistone and John Bosacco—gave Origer a $150,000 line of credit to finish the season.

The Fire now had Bubba Wyche, but it didn't look like having him was going to do much good anyway. Against The Hawaiians, he hit on only 8 of 24 passes and had three of his tosses picked off before he was benched for Bill Cappelman. The Fire could have replaced him with Johnny Unitas, Joe Montana or Peyton Manning and it wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference. That's because the defense looked absolutely helpless as The Hawaiians buried the Fire, 60-17. Yes, that's right, *60*-17, the 60 points matching the league record. The Chicago defense had been no great shakes to begin with, but this was the bottom of the barrel. If you can believe it, the game wasn't even as close as the score indicated. The Hawaiians amassed 26 first downs and 528 yards in total offense.

Amazingly, Chicago actually led 7-0 and 10-8 in the first quarter before the roof caved in. The Hawaiians scored 30 points in the second quarter, alone. It was a complete reversal of fortunes from earlier in the season. On July 28th in Honolulu, the Fire had crushed The Hawaiians, 53-29, and, in all fairness, Spavital had tried to run up the score in that one. After this debacle, Spavital just said quietly, "Every dog has his day."

It wasn't Chicago's day a week later, either, as they lost another game, this time to Philadelphia, 37-31 to drop their record to 7-and-11. The Bell's multi-faceted offense rolled up and down the field for 450 yards in total offense and scored 22 points in the fourth quarter.

After the game, Tom Origer announced that his team would not play its last regular season game

against Philadelphia on November 13th. He said that 19 weeks of the Wiffle was all he could stomach.

In Memphis, although the team lost its 10th game in a row, 49-24, they didn't look like losers against the Southmen. They played hard, not looking at all like a team ready to pack it in (although their owner was). Bill Cappelman came off the bench when Bubba Wyche sprained his ankle and hit on 14 of 26 passes for 197 yards and helped keep the game fairly close into the fourth quarter. Wide receiver Jack Dolbin, resembling a mummy with all the bandages protecting various wounds, including a broken hand, caught a couple passes and also gained 26 yards on two end arounds.

But Dolbin realized things had fallen apart for the Fire and the Wiffle.

"Midway through the season, we played in Hawaii," said Dolbin. "They flew us over first class. They really did it right. It was very impressive the way they took care of us. But by the 16th game of the season, they had already cancelled the last game of the season. We were down in Memphis, and our pregame meal was cold cheese sandwiches. We kind of got the idea that the league was in trouble."

Despite their 10-game losing streak, the Fire was still able to average around 27,000 spectators per game during 1974. So it wasn't the financial state of the team that had discouraged Origer.

"He (Origer) was disappointed that the other owners didn't have the money to keep the WFL going," recalled Kellar, "Tom wanted to make sure it was a prudent investment. In the beginning it was, and later it wasn't. He had a real estate empire in Chicago, and didn't want to pay for the mistakes of the other WFL teams. Finally, he gave it up."

"In the Fire front office," Carter recalled, "Tom would tell me, 'there are four of us that have money and eight of us that don't, and they want us to take care of the other teams.' Tom was from a construction background and in construction when a job goes bad you gather up your tools and you head home."

That's precisely what Origer did.

CHAPTER 6

The Wheels Fell Off

The Detroit Wheels, 1974

"Losing ain't no fun. We're tired of it."
—Quarterback BUBBA WYCHE

Of all the sorry episodes involving the World Football League, the sorriest may have been the story of the Detroit Wheels.

From Day One, this franchise seemed to be in some sort of trouble.

On December 13th, 1973, ownership was put into the hands of a 28-year-old attorney named Louis R. Lee and no less than 32 other city entrepreneurs and businesspeople, including singer Marvin Gaye, Motown Records vice-president Esther Edwards, and Little Caesars Pizza founder Mike Ilitch.

You read that right; the Wheels had no less than 33 owners. Try to imagine 33 Jerry Joneses trying to decide on anything or get anything done. Talk about a prime example of the old saying, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." When attendance at the Wheels' games was disappointingly low, Joe Falls wrote in the *Detroit Free Press*, "The Wheels have 33 owners and this may be a good thing. They may have to count them in their home gate before very long." The situation was as bad as it sounded.

It then got worse. A man by the name of Clarence "Bud" Hucul stepped forward in February of 1974 and said he planned on filing a $7-million lawsuit against the team. It seemed that he was claiming he was the original owner of the franchise and had been promised that he would be part of the Lee ownership group. Hucul stated that he was forced out of ownership of the team after agreeing to merge his franchise rights. "I'm not suing anyone right now," said Hucul, "Hopefully we can work this thing out. But I will file suit and file injunctions on the whole league and the franchise if nothing is settled in the next few days.

"I don't want to see this team marred," Hucul insisted, "I want to see it go."

Hucul claimed that he had merged his franchise rights with the new group of 33 owners commissioned by Mayor Coleman Young. Wheels' Vice President Ken Hylton said he was familiar with Hucul's claim but wouldn't comment on it. He said he had talked to Hucul about the situation the week before, "and I assume I'll hear from him again."

Hucul claimed that he had met with Davidson and league attorney Max Muhleman to discuss ownership of the Detroit franchise. He also claimed that he had talked to Frosty Ferzacca, athletic director at Eastern Michigan, about using their football facilities, and also to ex-Lions' star player and coach Joe Schmidt about coaching his team. Schmidt did confirm that he had met with Hucul about the coaching job. "We talked, but I told him I wasn't interested in the job," said Schmidt, "That was the last time I talked to anyone with the WFL team until later when I talked with a member of the Detroit group whom I assumed became involved at a later time."

Muhleman said that "Yes, I remember he (Hucul) was the first contact we made in regard to a Detroit franchise. And we had several contacts with him afterwards. It was later that we learned that Hucul and the other Detroit group had reached some kind of an agreement to operate as one group."

Hucul, who was the recreation director for an association of hospitals in Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties, said he had invested $20,000 of his own money and had received nothing back.

Ten days later, Hucul said he was even closer to suing the club after talks with Lee's ownership group collapsed. "We were close last Friday, very close on Saturday and almost settled on Sunday," said Hucul, "Now we are miles apart."

Hucul was now claiming that he had done a four-month feasibility study for a proposed WFL team in Detroit after getting the go-ahead from Davidson. "I promised Davidson I'd deliver a franchise by December and I did," stated Hucul, "I suppose I was really the acting general manager, but I was willing to step aside and let others take the credit, but I did all the legwork."

In late March, Hucul finally filed a suit in Oakland County Circuit Court for $1.18-million against Coleman Young and several prominent citizens stating that they reneged on the agreement to give part ownership of the Wheels team to him.

Hucul claimed that the agreement, allegedly signed by Erwin Ziegelman, a Southfield attorney and one of the team's owners, was to give him three per cent ownership, a $35,000 a year job for five years, and reimbursement for $5,000 in expenses. Hucul claimed that after several organizational meetings, the group asked him to dissolve his association but then backed down on its original offer. Hucul was also claiming that he had lined up 16 wealthy investors, including members of the board of directors at the William Beaumont Hospital, to back his efforts to obtain the franchise.

It was found that Hucul was no stranger to court proceedings. He had been charged with larceny by conversion in 1965 for not completing a contracted construction job. The charge was dropped when Hucul agreed to pay restitution. Less than a month later, a bench warrant was signed by a judge for the arrest of Hucul on another similar charge. In the headline, Hucul was identified as a "con artist."

"I have no knowledge of any contracts or agreements made by the team," Coleman Young said, "I'm not even going to hire a lawyer, though I may consult with one."

Hucul's case literally went nowhere. It was dismissed on January 3rd, 1977 for lack of progress.

The franchise dealt in tough luck and ineptitude from the very beginning. Even by WFL standards and with 33 owners, the Wheels were severely undercapitalized. It seemed that the owners didn't actually make an initial capital investment; instead, all team expenses were paid out-of-pocket as they arose.

The owners initially refused to spend more than $10,000 per player. Most of their draft picks were unwilling to play under such conditions, so the Wheels were able to sign only three of their 33 draft picks, forcing them to hold open tryouts. Four months before the first game, the Wheels sent out a public call asking for anyone to try out for a chance to play on the team. Some 660 men turned up to try out. If the Wheels could have gotten that kind of public response all the time they might have been a financial success! Not one of the 660 men made the team, however.

When the team owners met to discuss sites for training camp, one enterprising owner suggested the team be housed in tents on Belle Island.

"We were talking about pre-season camp," said General Manager Sonny Grandelius, "and I said we should have it at someplace like Eastern Michigan University where they have the necessary dormitory facilities, locker rooms and so forth.

"One of our owners piped up and said 'Well, why don't you put the players out on Belle Isle?' That is a city-owned area, and I said there weren't any accommodations available there. He said, 'Well, why don't you put 'em up in tents? It would be just like camping out and the players would have a great time.'

"So, I said, 'Well, how are you going to feed 'em, how are they going to wash, how are they going to shave?' and he said, 'Oh, I didn't think of that!'"

Grandelius shook his head. "We would've been the laughingstock of the league if we had made our players pitch tents and camp out."

That's okay, Sonny, the Wheels would become a laughingstock soon enough.

"We just didn't know how to run a team," said Mike Novik, one of the owners, "It was just a lack of experience by everyone."

At first glance, Detroit seemed like a prime spot for a new football team. The Lions were preparing to play their final season in Tiger Stadium before moving out to Pontiac and the Silverdome, which were 25 miles from downtown, in the fall of '75. "Let the Pontiac Pussycats Go," the fans chanted.

The owners, supported by Mayor Coleman Young, had assured the commissioner that they could rent Tiger Stadium for their home games. But both the Lions and the Tigers (and the Bears for all we know) refused, and that deal fell through. There were no other facilities in the city, since the Silverdome was not yet completed. The University of Michigan, home of cavernous Michigan Stadium, also said no (this despite the fact that Lee was a Michigan alumnus). So, although it was a Detroit team in name, the franchise wound up playing all of its home games 37 miles away, in Rynearson Stadium, on the campus of Eastern Michigan in Ypsilanti. The owners had to

spend hundreds of thousands of dollars right off the bat to refurbish the tiny facility to make it somewhat adequate for a supposed major league franchise. Even the improvements brought the seating capacity to only 25,000, hardly major-league and barely minor-league!

"Detroit was weak," recalled Gary Davidson, "The mayor of Detroit, Coleman Young, promised if I gave them a franchise they would be able to play in Tiger Stadium, that was an outright lie. The Wheels ended up playing in the boonies."

Because of it, the team would be derisively called "The Ypsi-Gypsies" in the press.

The Wheels tried to entice Tennessee State head coach John Merritt to run the team, but he wisely turned them down. The team finally had to settle on a man named Dan Boisture to coach the club, a businessman who was making his living selling tools to the automotive industry. Before that, Boisture had been the football coach at Eastern Michigan.

Things weren't encouraging on the field, either. The Wheels had a decent quarterback in Joseph "Bubba" Wyche, brother of former NFL quarterback and head coach Sam Wyche. Bubba, a CFL veteran with Montreal and Saskatchewan, jumped to the WFL at the chance of playing, and starting, for a team in the U.S. and with a new league. "I could have signed with the CFL, but I really wanted the chance to start something new," claimed Wyche.

Wyche however had little in the way of protection—he would be sacked eleven times in one game and 37 times during the season—or receivers. The team signed former Chiefs' running back Warren McVea, but he reported to camp late, worked out for four days and then missed practice. Boisture suspended him and then added insult to injury by giving his #6 jersey to one of the ball boys.

"It would be very difficult for him to rejoin the team this season," Boisture said, "Very difficult." Boisture then showed how difficult by quickly shipping McVea to Houston for some much-needed cash.

The Wheels did not sign any NFL stars to "future contracts"—"My own ethics aren't going to allow me to promise something I can't deliver," said General Manager Sonny Grandelius—and procured most of their talent from north of the border, from the CFL, including wide receiver Jon Henderson from Calgary, running back Lee Fobbs from Ottawa, and defensive end Mike Walker from British Columbia. There were also a lot of players who had been cut at least once and sometimes two or three times, by the NFL and were looking for another shot at glory on the gridiron.

Typical of these was Carl Taibi, a 23-year-old defensive lineman from the University of Colorado. He had gone to training camp with the Redskins in 1972 and the Eagles in 1973 but was cut both times before the season started.

"I didn't know if I'd get a third shot at the NFL or not," Taibi said, "I figured they'd be a little leery after I'd been cut twice."

Taibi talked to the Edmonton Eskimos of the CFL and also with The Hawaiians, but was disappointed when he discovered he was on the Detroit protected list.

"I was a little upset at first," Taibi said, "I didn't know anything about the Detroit team and I had kinda planned to play in Hawaii.

"But all I want is a chance to establish myself. I don't really know anything else but football. I've done a lot of other things. I've driven a truck, worked for an employment agency, done construction, worked in a meatpacking house and in my Dad's bar. I don't keep a job very long.

"I just haven't found anything that really interests me like football."

Taibi was certainly not alone in the WFL. Many players who had been kicked around by pro football were hoping the WFL would give them another shot at the big time, the NFL.

"There are a lot of players cut by the NFL who could play if there was a place for them," said Boisture, "There are a lot of people like that who could help us."

A whole lot of people, as it turned out. The team started training camp with an unbelievable 115 players under contract, some of whom could actually play football. But a lot of them couldn't, and in all their wheeling and dealing, the Wheels wound up releasing 163 players before the season started.

Say What?

Before the season opened, Detroit GM Sonny Grandelius actually said, "I feel quite confident that, with the talent we have, the Wheels can make an honest, qualified run at the WFL title in our first year." If that wasn't enough to make one scratch their head, head coach Dan Boisture added, "I believe we can establish ourselves right away as a valid threat in the WFL." To what?? Good sense??

The Wheels opened their season in Memphis. To say that some players had the jitters about starting their first game in a new league was an understatement.

"We had a center, Dave Limebrook, who was a rookie," said Bubba Wyche, "and he got the jitters so bad that on the first snap of the game he threw up on the ball. After the play, he came back to the huddle and threw up again. All the guys were staring at him, some of them trying not to crack up, and I said, 'Either get it together or get out of here.' He was a bit shell-shocked by the whole spectacle."

So it seemed was most of the team. The Wheels fumbled the ball 4 times, gained only 56 yards rushing, and fell behind 18-0. They wound up being pummeled by Memphis, 34-15. Wide receiver Hubie Bryant, who almost didn't make the trip to Memphis due to a muscle pull, scored the Wheels' very first touchdown ever on a juggling catch of a Wyche pass that had been tipped. Bryant set up the team's second touchdown with a 53-yard reception to the Memphis three. But the Southmen were too much for the Wheels, piling up 21 first downs and 376 yards in total offense.

Boisture said he expected to make at least two or three changes in his offensive and defensive lineups before the Wheels' next game against Florida. "We evaluated the film of last week's game for hours and hours," Boisture said of the Wheels' loss to Memphis. "Then we went over our personnel and decided we had to make some changes." Among the changes was the purchase of running back Jesse Mims from the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League. Another CFL product, linebacker Sam Britts, worked out with the Wheels for the first time on Saturday the 13th. Britts, runner-up to Johnny Rogers for CFL Rookie of the Year in 1973, was negotiating with the Edmonton Eskimos to get out of the option year left on his contract. Boisture said the injury to kicker Dale Livingston hurt the Wheels against Memphis, but added "there were probably 15 reasons why we lost."

The Wheels tried to keep up a brave front. On the eve of their home opener on July 17th, ticket manager Brian Rickiel predicted, "We'll sell out." But only 10,631 people attended their first home game, an 18-14 loss to Florida, the smallest crowd in the WFL so far.

"High school games have drawn more here," wrote Joe Falls in the *Detroit Free Press*.

"I'm quite disappointed," said GM Sonny Grandelius, "but I'm not ready to give up. I'm sure the people of Detroit will eventually identify with the team and attendance will pick up." From the looks of things, the Wheels couldn't even get the people of Ypsilanti to identify with the team. The Wheels were not helped by the fact that one local newspaper listed the game's starting time as 7:30 while another said it was 8:30.

The Wheels had carted out three sets of portable bleachers to handle what they were hoping would be a large crowd. But only seven fans sat in one section, three in the other and only one solitary person was in the other.

Club President Louis Lee spent most of the game walking through the stands talking to fans. "I was trying to convince people to come back next time," said Lee.

"It's still hard to understand why more people didn't come out," Grandelius went on, "Not being in Detroit hurts. No question of that. But we're right in the middle of a great sports area. I thought we'd have a bigger turnout."

The Wheels drove to the Florida 1-yard line late in the game, but running back Jim Rathje was stopped for no gain and then Bubba Wyche overthrew everyone—maybe he was aiming at Tiger Stadium—to end the Wheels' threat and the game.

Say What?

After the loss to Florida, Bubba Wyche actually said, "It's doesn't mean anything that we've lost our first two games. It's a long season . . . so we'll go 18-and-2."

Just four days later, Detroit flew to Honolulu to face The Hawaiians. The Wheels led 16-14 in the third quarter, but The Hawaiians exploded for 22 unanswered points and won, 36-16. "They picked our pass defense apart," said Boisture, speaking of a unit that gave up 231 yards and three touchdowns. "We just had some breakdowns back there." The Wheels weren't helped when cornerback Clyde Glosson had to move to wide receiver to replace Charles McKee and John Embree, both of whom left the game early due to injuries. The Wheel defense, which Boisture thought would be one of the league's better ones, was giving up points at a 29.7 per game clip, worst in the league.

"They have made some cuts up in Canada," said Boisture, "and we're talking to some of those people. We definitely need two or three more people."

Wyche, who hadn't been picked off in the first two games, was intercepted three times, and the Wheels were still 0-for-1974.

And, as it turned out, already in deep trouble. The owners were already in the process of weighing three options open to them: 1) Sell the team to investors who would move it; 2) Sell the team to local investors; or 3) Keep shoveling money into a very deep hole.

"There is no question that ownership will have to be re-structured," said Grandelius, "It's a simple matter of mathematics. The fan support hasn't been there. Our owners realize now, too, that it's a difficult proposition to try to operate a business with 33 owners." Geez, ya think???!!!

Davidson was a little blunter. "There are definitely some problems in Detroit," understated the commissioner.

There definitely were. Reportedly, the Wheels' players didn't receive a paycheck for their first game until after they had played their second.

The franchise's second home game drew only 14,614 people as the Wheels lost to Birmingham, 21-18, on a late touchdown by the Americans.

"The lack of experience in coaching hurt us against Birmingham," said Bubba Wyche, "because they had the experienced coaching staff and they were making adjustments that made things difficult for us and we didn't counter. We did play them well, and I feel we should have won."

Detroit' roster was beginning to resemble an episode of MASH. The Wheels lost tight end Dennis Macholz (knee), wide receiver Hubie Bryant (thigh), cornerback Floyd Priester (concussion) and Wyche (knee) during the game. The club's manpower problem was so bad that the Wheels were actually hoping the NFL would settle its strike so they could pick up any players that would be cut.

The team wasn't performing all that badly on the field, witness to the fact that they had more first downs and gained more yardage than Birmingham, but the problem was that no one seemed to care. Attendance was dreadful and money was running out. Talk was already being heard that the team would be moved.

"There is still considerable sentiment for keeping the team here," said David Pollack, the chairman of the Wheels' executive committee, "Four or five or six people among the present owners have expressed an interest in buying the team."

An indication of the shaky ground the team was standing on came to light a week later. As the Wheels were preparing to leave for Birmingham on August 7th to play the Americans, they got the news that the Edmonton Eskimos of the CFL had filed an injunction in a Detroit court banning linebacker Sam Britts, one of the team's better players, from playing with the team. The Eskimos, who Britts had played for in 1973, filed the injunction because the Wheels failed to make a payment of $25,000 for Britts' contract. The Wheels had to fly Mike Taylor, who had been on the injured list, to Birmingham to take Britts' place on the roster. That night, in Birmingham, before a crowd—40,367—the Wheels could only dream of, the Americans nipped Detroit 28-22, on a touchdown with only 26 seconds left. The Wheels, if nothing else, were the league's best 59-minute team.

After that game in Birmingham, Coach Dan Boisture singled out the Americans' running backs to emphasize the difficulties his team was facing. "Charlie Harraway and Paul Robinson cost the Americans more than our entire offense cost us," he said.

Still, despite the money problems, the Wheels had come close to winning four of its five games. "Our kids love the game," Boisture said. "They have to because they sure aren't being paid much."

A week later, Memphis came to town and crushed the Wheels for the second time of the season, 37-7. After scoring to move within 8-7 of the Southmen in the first quarter, the Wheels looked helpless as Memphis scored 29 straight points to run away with the game. Not only that, the Wheels again suffered an incredible string of injuries during the game. They lost no less than four linebackers, plus running back Jesse Mims (elbow), tight end Mickey McCarty (hand), defensive tackle Carl Taibi (ankle), offensive guard Jim O'Connor (knee), offensive guard Bennett Edwards (shoulder), and wide receiver Hubie Bryant (a hamstring this time).

The Wheels were in trouble, both on and off the field. UPI Sports Editor Milton Richman said the team had "been nothing more than a brand new set of flat tires." In an effort to try to increase the so far pitiful attendance figures, the Wheels' management had come up with the idea of having picnics on the stadium grounds.

But like most of the innovations the team had devised, it backfired. Jerry Green recorded the results of the first implementation of the picnic plan in the *Detroit News*: "There were theatrics on the night of Aug. 14th, 1974 in the stadium at Ypsilanti," Green wrote, "A guy in blue made a one-hand stab. His graceful bit of acrobatics prompted the assemblage of 14,424—officially announced—to emit a throaty roar."

"Hey, what was all that cheering up there?" asked Boisture in the locker room after the game.

"'Frisbee,' a sympathetic individual told Boisture. 'The fans were sailing a Frisbee back and forth throughout the third quarter.'"

"'Oh, that breaks our hearts a little,' said Boisture."

Heartbreak was the name of the game for the Wheels.

Their hearts broke a little more a week later when, on August 22nd, during a 35-23 loss to Chicago in

front of another small crowd (this time 10,300 die-hards), the Wheels' pep band actually started playing "Light My Fire." This just heaped insult onto injury in a game where the Wheels managed all of a minus 2 yards passing and had their quarterbacks—Eric Guthrie and Bruce Shaw, filling in for an injured Bubba Wyche, who wrenched his back in practice two days before the game—sacked seven times. The Fire dominated the statistics as well as the game, amassing 21 first downs and 367 yards in total offense to only 12 first downs and 172 yards for Detroit.

"We looked like an 0-and-6 team," said Boisture.

Earlier in the day, the Wheels scheduled a press conference to announce what they said was "something good." The presser was later called off, adding more confusion to the already chaotic situation. The team's executive committee did meet for 90 minutes before the loss to the Fire in the team offices in the Lafayette Building to discuss the possible sale of the team, but nothing came of that get-together. "We have nothing to report," said David Pollock, the chairman of the executive committee, "But I'll tell you this: As of now, we do not have a firm offer; by that I mean we don't have a check." There were lots of new rumors circulating that the Wheels had come across "fresh money" that would keep them in Detroit. Still others speculated that the team was on its way to Charlotte or Louisville.

"Everything you hear right now is just rumor," said Sonny Grandelius.

"I don't know what's going on up there," Dan Boisture said, referring to the front office, "And that's part of the problem."

Although the owners seemed to be going about the business of a sale in a very deliberate fashion—again that idea of too many cooks spoiling the broth—there was no question that the matter of a sale had to be resolved and had to be resolved soon.

A league assessment of $230,000 had been due on July 1st, but the Wheels were granted a deferment because of the league's belief that there was going to be a public stock auction, which would raise the necessary money without draining what little resources the team had. But the stock offering died, and the league was growing impatient for the club to bring its accounts up to date.

The shareholders in the franchise were notified that there would be a general meeting of the owners at 10am on September 6th to consider any offers to buy the club.

Boisture and his coaches continued to try to come up with the right combinations to turn the season around. So far, the club had used three quarterbacks, ten running backs and 15 receivers. But nothing seemed to work. The rash of injuries had also forced the team to switch several defensive players to offensive positions, which further weakened the defensive team.

The team by now had a Help Wanted sign in the window of their offices, as in football players, any football players, wanted!

"We've been talking to some people and I think there'll be four or five new people around here soon, probably by Saturday," said Boisture.

Still winless and undermanned, the Wheels went to Philadelphia and on a hot muggy night, lost their eighth in a row, 27-23 to the Bell. It may have been the low point of the season. When the players arrived at John F. Kennedy Stadium, they discovered that they didn't have any medical supplies or tape. The Wheels refused to take the field and the team was nearly forced to forfeit until a Johnson & Johnson salesman donated tape so that the game could go on. The Wheels, with their minds on where their next checks might come from, blew yet another lead, this one 16-14 and lost 27-23. The team should have forfeited and saved itself the trouble.

Bubba Wyche scored twice on quarterback sneaks, but he and Bruce Shaw were sacked six times to sabotage any kind of attack the Wheels might have put together.

The Wheels' next game, originally scheduled as a home game against the Portland Storm, was moved to J.W. Little Stadium in London, Ontario, on the campus of the University of Western Ontario. Rumors flew that the move was made in anticipation of the Detroit franchise moving to another city. Wheels' management had to announce that the site change had nothing to do with their financial problems and that the shift was for the one game only.

"We want to make that very clear," said Sonny Grandelius.

The move was actually orchestrated by Storm owner Robert Harris, who was from London and was considering moving *his* club to the Ontario city and renaming them the London Lords. Harris reportedly received $30,000 from local promoters, who obviously lost their shirts, as well as the buttons, in the deal.

"We traveled by bus to the game from Detroit," said Bubba Wyche, "It was a beautiful day. To call it a stadium was a stretch. I do recall it had seats on both sides of the field. It was outside of a military base, a huge facility. It was more like a fairground, and we

had to walk a great distance to get to the field. The dressing rooms were limited, there wasn't much room. The field was wide open and there was a lot of room from the field to the stands. There weren't a lot of people there and I'm sure the game was not that well publicized. The London, Ontario sports fan was not exactly a true WFL fan.

"It was presented to us that the league was trying to promote itself in Canada," Wyche recalled, "and going over there identified with the name 'World Football League.' I think this was one attempt to create some excitement and success for the league. I have played in some great stadiums, but in the WFL you got the feeling that they were attempting to create something professional with very few resources."

"I got the impression from the very beginning that it was being treated as an exhibition," said Wheels' publicity director Ray Hozer, "It just was not like a real game. People in London looked at it as an exhibition."

And it wasn't a very good exhibition at that. The groundskeepers at the stadium, who were used to CFL rules, marked the field off for 110 yards, and then had to quickly change it. No numbers were painted on the field, so the grounds crew placed red pylons 10 yards apart so that fans, coaches and players could tell where the ball was.

The game drew one of the smallest crowds (and the author uses the term crowd very loosely) of the Wiffle season, an announced gathering of 5,105. Newspaper reports, however, indicated there were only about 2,500 people there. "I don't think there was a thousand there," said defensive lineman Mike Walker. It was the only "World" Football League game played outside the United States.

The 26-man Royal Canadian Legion Marching Band played both "The Star Spangled Banner" and "God Save the Queen." But that was about the extent of any quality that occurred on the field that day.

All season long, Boisture kept saying, "Wait until we get to the easier part of our schedule." Well, that easier part started in London against the equally winless Storm. It made little difference to the hapless Wheels, however. The Storm managed to win their first of the year by beating Detroit, 18-7.

"I'm not going to say much," Boisture said quietly, "If I say much, I'm sure to get in trouble. We've just got to tighten the screws. What more can I say? You saw the game. We made a lot of mistakes. We're hurting at linebacker . . . we have so many people hurt. But I'll tell you this, we're going to bring in a lot of new people—we've got to."

Say What?

Team President Louis R. Lee actually said that if the turnouts for the Wheels' games were too great, that the team would look into the possibility of moving some games to the University of Michigan's 105,000-seat stadium. Talk about whistling in the dark . . . the Wheels' five home games drew a total—not average, but *total*—of 56,320 fans, still less than half the capacity of the "Big House" in Ann Arbor. Needless to say, the phone never rang in the office of Michigan Athletic Director Bo Schembechler.

As the losses piled up, the team's ramshackle financial situation became more tenuous. Boisture and Grandelius badly wanted to put together a serious football organization, but the owners refused all requests for more money. For one home game there were no programs available because the printer hadn't been paid. Several practices were canceled because the cleaning bill went unpaid, leaving the team without uniforms. The laundries started refusing to deliver the clean uniforms until the bills were paid. Publicity Director Ray Hozer ran out of players' photos and was forbidden to have any more printed. Coach Dan Boisture no longer had any funds to film the team's games. The team couldn't pay their phone bill, and they were unable to reserve hotel rooms or fly to away games without advance payment. Players were forced to share food and rent due to missed paydays; several players ended up sharing a house. "It was pretty bush," punter Chuck Collins said, "I once had to use two t shirts to dry off after practice."

"We got very disappointed and disgusted about the sacrifices we were asked to make," said Bubba Wyche, "In the beginning of the season, we overlooked the shortcomings of the league, but the sacrifices we were asked to make became too overwhelming. The players on the Wheels were not getting paid at all. We didn't even get food money. So it was devastating to someone who had high aspirations of getting into pro football and then couldn't get food money or compensation for your work."

The situation prompted Wyche to write to league president Gary Davidson and beg the league office to intervene. "The situation here is desperate," Wyche wrote to the Commissioner, "Please give us some relief, will you?" In his letter, Wyche explained how the team had to cancel practice because their uniforms couldn't be delivered from the cleaners, how the players were forced into sharing rent and food for survival and how the players wondered about the future of their team.

"Some of the decisions we made in the WHA that were successful and we thought would carry over to the World Football League, didn't carry over well," Davidson admitted, "We kept teams alive in the WHA and kept them going through the season. The WFL kept the Detroit Wheels alive when we should've closed them down, drafted their players, and dropped their schedule. It had worked before so we thought it would be the best way to do it, when, in reality, if we had dropped a couple teams the league would've survived."

The only thing that kept the Wheels from being a total laughingstock was the tales of financial woe the players and their families had to face. One assistant coach, Owen Dejanovich, was refused housing three times when the prospective landlords learned he worked for the Wheels. "People won't lease to me when they hear I am with the Wheels," said Dejanovich, "Three times I've made deposits and three times they've given my money back. Once, I offered the people $1,700. That was two months' rent plus the deposit, which is a lot of money." Dejanovich wound up living in the basement of fellow assistant coach Chick Harris while he and his wife searched for motels with kitchenettes.

Wide receiver Jon Henderson had to take his son to a local hospital for treatment, and wound up paying the $500 bill out of his own pocket when he was told the Wheels' hospitalization policy was worthless.

"Circumstances in Detroit prevented us from having a good club," said wide receiver Hubie Bryant, "and it seemed like every time mistakes were made, the players were the only ones who really suffered. Everybody was at each other's throats . . . not the players themselves, though. I'm proud that the Detroit team stuck together in the face of all those problems."

When it came to the late paychecks, everybody seemed quick to point fingers. The players blamed the club's business office, the club blamed poor attendance and the coaching staff was caught in the middle.

"Our paychecks were delayed with petty excuses, almost unbelievable excuses," remembered Bubba Wyche, "Things like, 'administrative problems' or 'holdups at the main office.' We would stand there and say, 'Home office? I thought this WAS the home office?'"

Things got so bad that groups of players, their wives and even kids would be forced to move into a single house, which made it easier to evacuate if word came down that the team was moving to another city.

"I lived on Ford Lake and offensive tackle Mike Taylor moved in," recalled Wyche, "Then one of the defensive coaches, Owen DeJanovich, and his wife moved in and we eventually had a commune setting. It included players as well as coaches. I know they were not getting paid either. In some ways the coaches had it harder because they had to maintain a positive attitude for the players despite what was happening to them. We would share expenses, meals, everything. Players had to move in with each other, share meals and food, split bills, it was a tough time."

"I don't know where things went wrong," said defensive back Rocky Long, "but they sure went wrong somewhere along the line. The first time I knew we were in trouble was when I read it in the newspapers. The team and coaches always have been the last ones to know anything.

"We never know from day to day almost, where we're going to practice or where we're going to play. We went a couple of games without scouting film because the club couldn't afford to process it and more than once we've worn dirty uniforms to practice.

"We've just had to patch up old stuff and make it do," Long continued, "I guess, because we couldn't buy anything else. All the problems have put a lot of pressure on everybody. We've been thinking about everything but football."

"I expected the utmost," said Wyche, "I had visions of everything being rosy . . . I never dreamed anything like this would happen. It gets more complex every day. It's just never ending.

"Sharing food and rent is a matter of survival," Wyche said, "It's just the way it is here."

The Wheels ran out of adhesive tape and had to borrow some from opposing teams. When the team moved its practice facility to Belle Island, they found the showers and locker rooms only partially completed, and the field covered in horseshit, which seemed symbolic when you think about it.

Talk about taking a "shoestring budget" a little too seriously: one player said he could not even get a shoelace when he needed one!

Attendance at Rynearson Stadium was pitiful. During the second half of one game, the P.A. system blared, "The Wheels will play out of town next week," and the few spectators in attendance actually cheered.

It was the league's most dire situation. The team's original 33 owners appeared to pay for team expenses out of pocket as they arose, resulting in what amounted to a club football team playing at the professional level. During one stretch, when the franchise's impending death seemed imminent, the Wheels went more than a week without selling a single ticket.

Charlie Vincent wrote in the *Detroit Free-Press*, "All their problems can be attributed to having 33 owners.

none of whom has more than $50,000 in the club. It amounts to a bunch of amateurs trying to make it big in the pro football business, all of whom panicked at the outset when the club lost a few games."

Team spokesman and quarterback Bubba Wyche got into an altercation with team official Albert Chester over missed paychecks. Chester alleged that Wyche lifted him "a great distance in the air" and threw him against a wall during an argument in the Wheels' offices. Chester had been sent by the WFL to run the Wheels' business office.

"We sent a guy out to the Wheels with a paycheck," says Gary Davidson, "and the players roughed up our man from the home office."

"Nobody touched anybody," stressed Wyche, "there was no physical contact that took place. It was nothing more than a business meeting that got heated because there was nothing but lies being told to us and we simply weren't going to listen anymore."

Chester sued Wyche, the Wheels and the League for $10-million. It took several years to straighten the whole mess out, but in the end, in May of 1977, the judgment was in favor of Wyche and the league.

On September 6th, as scheduled, the team owners met to decide what everyone thought would be the fate of the franchise. After a couple hours, Louis Lee emerged and announced that nothing had been done in regards to a potential buyer.

"What we did today was satisfy some legal requirements for the sale of the stock in the club," said Lee. Stockholders, meanwhile, refused to comment on the status of the impending sale. In others words, it seemed like the owners had again done absolutely squa-doosh to solve the myriad of problems plaguing the team.

John Noonan, a lawyer for automotive magnate John DeLorean, said his client planned to push ahead with his plans to buy the club over the weekend. Noonan added that DeLorean would keep the team in the area if his offer was accepted.

That night, in what turned out to be the team's last home game, the Wheels drew an announced and embarrassing crowd of 6,351 fans, though the actual attendance figure was a lot closer to 2,500.

The few in attendance saw quarterback Bruce Shaw complete only one pass all night and finish the game with a minus 11 yards passing. The Wheels hung tough, however, as defensive back Dave Walker picked off two passes, and Detroit recovered three fumbles. Running back Sam Scarber scored on a 19-yard run to put Detroit up 7-3 late in the game. But the Sun drove downfield on their next possession and scored with a little over 4 minutes left to take a 10-7 lead. Running back Billy Sadler returned the ensuing kickoff 39 yards to the Sun 43-yard line. In three plays the Wheels moved to the 30, but Scarber fumbled and Southern California recovered. The Wheels defense held the Sun to five yards in three plays, but on fourth down Mike Walker was called for roughing the punter. Southern California ran out the last 58 seconds of the game and won, 10-7. Detroit was now 0-and-10.

Meanwhile, the financial problems continued to deepen. "We hadn't been paid in weeks," said Wyche, "Players were having medical problems and couldn't receive treatment, some couldn't eat, others didn't have a home or a place to stay, many of the players were missing practice 'cause they didn't have the money to pay for gas or even a bus ticket—and on down the line, just horrible, horrible stories."

Wiffle officials continued to talk about yanking the club out of Detroit—er, Ypsilanti—and moving the tattered franchise to someplace where the pasture *had* to be greener, say Charlotte, Little Rock, Jackson, Mississippi, or Shreveport.

Rumors circulated that Shreveport seemed to be the league's first choice for a relocation of the franchise. The scenario of the move was even being speculated on, with the team's name being changed to the Captains, and offers being made to L.S.U. head coach Paul Dietzel and Steelers'—and former Louisiana Tech—quarterback Terry Bradshaw to join the team. Coincidentally, Bradshaw had made headlines the previous week by demanding a trade.

But believe it or not, there was actually pressure to keep the team in Detroit. That's because Chevrolet was the Wiffle's biggest TV advertising account, and the city was the nation's Number Five TV advertising market. So the suffering on the part of the team continued just so Chevy could sell some TV spots.

Still winless, Detroit travelled to Orlando to play the Eastern Division leading Florida Blazers. It looked like a mismatch.

The Wheels had come close to winning several times before, but this time they finally got over the hump. Before a disappointed crowd in the Tangerine Bowl, Detroit stunned the Blazers, 15-14. After being dominated in the first half, giving up 205 yards while managing only 44 of their own and just three first downs, the Wheels came alive in the third quarter. Back-to-back sacks by Tom Ramsey and Charles Ratcliff pushed the Blazers deep into their own territory. The ensuing punt carried to midfield, and on first down, Bubba Wyche spied Jon Henderson alone and connected with him for a 50-yard touchdown to tie

it. Later in the period, on a fourth down play, punter and backup quarterback Eric Guthrie passed to Terry Hoeppner from punt formation for a first down. "We had to be a little adventurous and it worked," said Boisture.

With 1:46 left in the third quarter, Billy Sadler, carrying cornerback Miller Farr on his back, plowed in from the six to give the Wheels the lead, 14-7. Wyche then passed to Sadler for the action point and a 15-7 edge. The Blazers closed to within 15-14 with a touchdown of their own, but Dave Walker broke up the action point pass to maintain the one-point margin.

With 1:51 left in the game, the Blazers threatened again, but Dave Walker batted a Bob Davis pass up into the air and Hoeppner gathered it in to preserve the 15-14 win.

"I didn't count on it until the last second finally ran off the clock," said Boisture afterward, "We've played so many games like this this season, we were due to win one.

"I tell you, it's great. The kids don't know how to act."

The win over the Blazers was bittersweet, however. Shortly after the game, the league took over control of the team. Each of the remaining clubs were assessed a $60,000 fee to help keep the Wheels from going flat.

With the league now in control, Henry Lee Parker, WFL Vice President of Football Operations, said that there was the possibility the franchise would be moved to Little Rock, Arkansas. "If it was up to me, they'd move in here tomorrow," Parker told the press, "I've felt for a long time that Little Rock was a good football oriented city." Parker said that factors to consider in making the move would be team support, population, a practice field, the availability of a stadium, and whether playing dates could be arranged at the new site. Parker added that if the team moved to Little Rock, he would act as GM for the rest of the season.

While Little Rock may have been a fine city, it was still a long way down the pecking order from Detroit. Problems or not, the Wiffle needed big market cities like Detroit to attract investors and TV advertisers. Talk of moving teams from New York and Detroit to places like Little Rock, Shreveport, Charlotte, and Jackson, Mississippi, just made the WFL look all the more like a glorified minor-league operation.

Esther Edwards of Motown Records, one of the 33 owners, reportedly was interested in buying controlling interest in the team. Another one of the owners, Mike Ilitch, was also briefly interested in buying the club.

Yet another interested party was automobile executive John DeLorean who had wanted to buy the team in hopes of keeping it in Detroit, but he backed out when the depth of the team's financial difficulties were revealed. John Noonan, representing DeLorean and his business partner Ray Zurkowski, said that Davidson told him at a league meeting that the current owners were in debt to the league up their proverbial eyeballs, specifically to the tune of $820,000. "They owe $480,000 for the franchise, $190,000 for league assessments, and $150,000 that the league has advanced them since taking over their financial problems," said Noonan. If all this was true, that meant that the owners—all 33 of them—put up only $70,000 cash—roughly $2,100 each—to bring the club to Detroit in the spring. How far they each thought that $2,100 was going to get them is anyone's guess. John Bassett had not been far off when he said early in the season, "I mean, I don't know the situation in Detroit. They tell me 33 guys got together and each put in 15 cents to buy the club."

Noonan was unsure whether the large debt would dampen the enthusiasm of DeLorean and Zurkowski—wouldn't it anybody's?—but added that "talking time is over . . . now they either have to say, 'go, man, go,' or back off. We're preparing the formal proposal now and will submit it to them for their OK."

If DeLorean's bid fell through, then the next choice was Charlotte, North Carolina, where former New England Patriots general manager Upton Bell was hoping to put together financing for a WFL team. Bell had shown an interest in purchasing the woebegone Wheels and moving them to Charlotte. He announced that he had told the Charlotte Park and Recreation Commission that he would reveal his plans on the 20th.

"We are hoping for a favorable answer from Bell," said Tim Grandi, an assistant to Gary Davidson, 'There are indications that he is very close to taking the team to Charlotte. But the possibility does exist that the league would make the move if he does not . . . the city is considered a very favorable location."

Bell was unable to come to an agreement regarding the Wheels, however, and would opt instead to buy the New York Stars and move them to Charlotte. The league then gave the team until September 27th to find a suitable buyer, whether it was someone local or someone who would move the team. The league did say that if the transaction to new ownership was not completed by the 27th, the franchise would be either moved by the league itself to one of a number of southern cities—including Jackson, Mississippi, Little Rock, Arkansas, Shreveport, Louisiana, or Louisville, Kentucky—or folded.

The next choice for a new home for the woeful franchise was Shreveport, but the Houston Texans moved

there and became the Steamer. The team then tried to move to Louisville, but talks with that city collapsed.

In the midst of a one-game winning streak, the Wheels travelled to Anaheim to play the Sun on September 18th. The game followed the same sad script it had all year for the luckless Wheels. Detroit played a solid game, holding the Western Division leading Sun to just 39 yards on the ground and forcing three turnovers. But while they were winning the battles, the Wheels were losing the war on the scoreboard. Trailing 22-3, however, Detroit fashioned an impressive comeback, scoring on a 34-yard pass from Bubba Wyche to Terry Phillips, and a one-yard quarterback sneak by Wyche to make it 22-17 with 9:35 still left. Finally, with 1:47 remaining, the Wheels scored the go-ahead touchdown on another Wyche to Phillips pass, this one from the 18 that was tipped by the defense and juggled momentarily by Phillips. Detroit led, 24-22.

But a two-game winning streak was not in the cards. With a minute left, Southern California scored to take the lead 29-24. Wyche, hobbled on injured knees, tried gamely but his last second drive was thwarted by an interception. Once again, the Wheels had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory with another come-from-ahead loss.

On September 24th, the Wheels faced the Stars in Downing Stadium, and lost 37-7 in what proved to be the Stars' last game in New York. The game was billed as "The Bankrupt Bowl." After the game, the Wheels were told that their team had indeed filed for bankruptcy.

"I'd like to hang the owners by their thumbs. They were just thirty-three jerks who thought they'd be millionaires overnight," snarled punter Chuck Collins, "They told us one truthful thing out of five thousand lies. That was the fact we were bankrupt."

The team filed a petition for reorganization under Federal Bankruptcy Laws, and listed debts of more than $2.5-million.

The Wheels traveled to Shreveport, where they lost yet another heartbreaker, 14-11 on a touchdown pass with a little over 5 minutes left in the game. "That's been the story of our lives," said Boisture, "Winning going into the last minutes and get beat.

"They played good and hard for a team without a home," Boisture continued, describing his team, "They'll finish out the season fighting. They've got a lot of personal pride. They've never quit."

"We just didn't capitalize on their mistakes," said Wyche, who hit on 11 of 21 passes for 130 yards and a touchdown, "We got inside their 30 several times and didn't score and that's absurd!

"We wanted to win," added Wyche, "Losing ain't no fun. We're tired of it."

Asked what was next for the Wheels, defensive end Mike Walker responded, "We'll go back to Detroit and practice where we've been practicing and that's not too encouraging."

Questioned about where the Wheels might end up, Boisture shrugged and said, "I've heard Louisville mentioned and Little Rock and Mexico City, but I don't know."

After the loss to Shreveport, with no new home to be found for the team, the league finally and mercifully folded the franchise. The Wheels, so to speak, had finally fallen off the thing. While the franchise officially folded on October 7th, players and coaches had been taking their uniforms and personal items home with them for some time to keep them from being seized by creditors.

"It was obvious it was going to happen," said Bubba Wyche, "There were signs all around us. There were a lot of rumors going around, we went in to the practice field and the trainer and the equipment manager just told us, 'No more practice, no more team, it's over, go home.' The players were scrambling around picking up helmets, jerseys, footballs, and pants before the bill collectors came in and confiscated all the assets of the team. I walked out with my football helmet; I still have it in my trophy case today."

The Wheels finished their lone season with the WFL's worst record at 1-and-13, which led *Detroit News* columnist Jerry Green to suggest the team be renamed the Hubcaps, since they are so much easier to rip off.

The team had been terrible, but had their share of bad luck as well: eight of Detroit's losses came by less than a touchdown, and they held fourth-quarter leads in seven games. Playing in the tough Central Division with the league's two best teams, Memphis (17-3) and Birmingham (15-5), made things even more difficult for the hapless team.

The financial losses the Wheels suffered were indeed mind-blowing. When they were finally liquidated, the team owed creditors nearly $4 million. The team found itself hounded by 122 creditors looking to recoup losses. The franchise had averaged around 7,500 fans per game. The Lions, meanwhile, in the middle of a lackluster 7-and-7 season, were drawing 50,000 a game to Tiger Stadium.

After the team folded, the Wiffle held a dispersal draft of the Detroit players. Only 16 of the team's 37 players were chosen. Gary Davidson promised that those players not drafted would have their contracts

paid off by the league. We sincerely hope that none of the players held their breath too long.

As for the rest of the Wheels' personnel, they scattered to the winds.

GM Sonny Grandelius went to work for Cordin Freight Company, and his boss was Robert Chambers, one of the team's investors. "I can't hazard a guess if the WFL will make it or not," added Grandelius, "but it's understating the issue to say they're in extreme financial difficulty."

Dan Boisture planned on going into industrial sales, and said the league still owed him and his coaching staff a month's pay, but added that "the league doesn't have any money, either, so what am I going to do?"

Chuck Collins was spending his days doing chores around his future in-laws' house in Ann Arbor, waiting to start a job with Vic Tanny.

Tight end Dennis Macholz, who had been injured in the third game of the season, was back in East Lansing rehabbing his knee, hoping "somebody picks me up next season." Macholz also got an unpleasant surprise in the mail. "The hospital sent me a bill from when I was in because of my knee," said Macholz, "I assumed the team was taking care of that so I just forwarded the bill to the league offices in California."

Linebacker Mike Taylor was negotiating with some NFL teams. Offensive guard Bennett Edwards said it was a bad time to look for a job so he was "working as a volunteer in the Harper Rehabilitation Institute, just trying to help out, mostly because I've got nothing else to do." Edwards did say he was also rehearsing with a musical group.

Reserve fullback Phil Allen was back home in Massachusetts, "looking into business and law schools. My experience with the Wheels was something I'll never forget, but I'm not sure I'd want to go through it again."

Wide receiver Jon Henderson had moved back to Denver, and said, "I think I've had it with football. This season really matured me a lot. I'm 29 and I just think I've had it. I don't believe I'd want to go through this again."

Rip Collins had quit the Wilson Sporting Goods Company to become the Wheels' equipment manager and was out of football. Linda Johnson, who had been the secretary for Wheels' Business Manager Jim Lowe, said she noticed one significant difference between working for the Wheels and working at her new job with the Michigan Health Maintenance Organization. "Here they say, 'Why haven't you gone to lunch yet?' instead of 'You can't go out to lunch,'" Johnson said.

Stan Hansen, the professional wrestler, had a brief stint as a player with the Wheels. Nevertheless, he was promoted as a "former star" of the team when wrestling in a promotion in his hometown of Amarillo, Texas.

Carl Taibi? Although he had a solid season for the Wheels, he never made it back to the NFL. He played for Jacksonville in 1975 and that was the end of his pro football career.

The Wheels had written their own chapter to Detroit's professional football history. It was part tragedy and part comedy. Their saga lasted less than a year, but was filled with more pathos than five seasons with the Lions. Alex Karras, Bobby Layne, Joe Schmidt, Dick LeBeau, and Barry Sanders are names easy to remember. But once heard, the story of men like Bubba Wyche, Sheldon Joppru, Jon Henderson, Hubie Bryant, Rocky Long and Chuck Collins isn't easy to forget.

CHAPTER 7

A Blaze of Glory

The Florida Blazers, 1974

"I never knew there could be such a thing as a bad certified check until I worked in the World Football League."

—Head Coach JACK PARDEE

The WFL had a lot of teams that didn't finish where they started. It was a league made up of vagabond franchises, travelling the country in search of a home. Houston, Memphis, Toronto, Boston, and New York were all teams that started out in one location and ended up in another. The same was true for the Florida Blazers.

The franchise had quite a journey in the spring of 1974. They experienced a dizzying five months of indecision and uncertainty. Like homeless waifs searching for a home, the franchise started out in Washington, D.C., then moved to, in order, Baltimore, Annapolis, Maryland, Norfolk, Virginia, and finally to Orlando, Florida. It was known at various times as the Capitals, the Americans, the Ambassadors, the Suns and the Blazers. All before the team ever played its first game.

In many ways the Blazers came to epitomize the WFL: chaotic beginnings, confused ownership, shifting sites, searching for a nickname, raiding of the NFL for personnel, legal hassles, financial woes and poor attendance.

The Capitals / Americans / Ambassadors / Suns / Blazers experienced them all.

The team started out as the brainchild of E. Joseph Wheeler, Jr., the 48-year-old president of an oceanographic engineering firm who liked to call himself a "Wheeler-doer." What he wanted to Wheeler-do was place a team in the nation's capital. On January 14th, Davidson awarded what was then the Washington franchise to Wheeler for a fee estimated at a quarter of a million dollars. Wheeler said he had backers, but apparently those backers were only interested in putting up their cash if Wheeler's new team could play in Washington's RFK Stadium. The rival Redskins, however, had an exclusive lease at RFK, and weren't about to let an interloper like Wheeler use the place. Wheeler complained about the large fees he would have to pay to the Redskins to let him share the stadium.

"He offered me a corporate note on a company called the Washington Capitals, Inc.," said Edward Bennett Williams, president of the Redskins. "He never even showed me the first dollar."

"Why, you couldn't have a PTA meeting in RFK Stadium without the Redskins approving it," countered Wheeler.

Wheeler could not pry a lease for RFK from the Redskins with the jaws of life. With RFK—and now most of his backers—out of the picture, Wheeler, while contemplating what to do next, changed the team's name to the very unwieldy Washington-Baltimore Ambassadors. Wheeler then announced his team would play its home games in Annapolis, 40 miles from Washington, at the U.S. Naval Academy's stadium. But there was a problem—the stadium had no lights. Not good for a league that was scheduling its names to be played on Wednesday and Thursday *nights*. Wheeler was told that they wouldn't be installed until mid-season at the earliest. Since it's tough to play football in the dark, Wheeler had to find yet another home. He even suggested playing home games at various stadiums on a rotating basis, but the idea of a "Brother Wheeler's Travelling Football Show" did not go over too well.

Meanwhile, the team was going through several identity crises. At first they were going to be called the Washington Capitals, but the expansion NHL team had already trademarked the rights to that nickname. An announcement that the club would be called the Americans revealed that Birmingham already had dibs on that name.

A contest was then held to name the team and the winning entry was the Ambassadors (although the husband of the husband-and-wife duo who won the contest preferred Spartans). The team then became the Washington-Baltimore Ambassadors, and then the Baltimore name was dropped, and the team simply became known as the Washington Ambassadors. In order to boost ticket sales, Wheeler offered former Baltimore Colts quarterback Johnny Unitas a contract as head coach and General Manager of the team. Unitas declined, stating that he was already under contract to the San Diego Chargers. And that he had the good sense not to get his hands anywhere near this train wreck. Spurned by Unitas, Wheeler reached out to Redskins assistant coach Jack Pardee with the same offer. Pardee jumped at the chance, and quickly signed with the new league.

"I looked around the NFL," said Pardee at his hiring, "and I saw plenty of good assistant coaches who never got a chance to be a head coach. I couldn't see waiting five years, or who knows how long, for an opportunity that might never come."

"I had five kids in school," Pardee remembered, "and there wasn't the money like there is today. I was going broke as it was anyway. I was with a good team, but it really wasn't a great job. I wasn't risking a lot. I wanted to become a head coach and I didn't want to wait too long. I was an assistant coach for one year and I was 37 years old, and that's a bit late to start any profession. I went to the WFL to prove that I could be a head coach. I was the low man on the totem pole with the Redskins."

His decision to leave the Redskins for the Ambassadors was a big plus for the new team. After all the indecision, confusion and chaos, Pardee brought a sense of direction to the team. Any sense of organization and competent operation was credited to him.

Pardee set about working with Director of Player Personnel DeWayne Jeter to fill out the team's roster. The coach, like his mentor George Allen, preferred veteran players, and went in that direction in recruiting players for the team.

"I'm not real fond of surprises," Pardee said, "I like to know how a player will react. We wanted a good base of veteran players, not all old players, but a good core of veterans. These veteran players have been winners. They know what winning is about. They can do a lot for our rookies."

He plucked veteran backup quarterback Bob Davis away from the Saints, and signed experienced pros like running backs Jim Strong and A.D. Whitfield, wide receiver Gary Collins, tight end John Hilton, defensive linemen Mike McBath and Louis Ross (although signing Ross would take some doing), linebackers Larry Ely and Larry Grantham, and defensive backs Miller Farr, Chuck Beatty, Billie Hayes and Rickie Harris. Added to the mix were youngsters like tight end Greg Latta, center Dan Peiffer, running back Tommy Reamon, defensive linemen John Ricca and Paul Vellano and linebacker Eddie Sheats, and Pardee had a solid core of players to build on.

While Pardee tried to build the franchise's credibility, Wheeler's credibility began to fade as quickly as his financial backing. He forgot about Washington and Annapolis and so, without ever stepping on the field, the team went through their *third* relocation, moving its base of operations to Norfolk, Virginia, and Wheeler told everyone he was there to stay. The team was now called the Virginia Ambassadors.

"He lacked only one thing: money," said George Robert House, Norfolk city manager.

Running on financial fumes by now, Wheeler needed a savior. To his rescue came Rommie Loudd, a former linebacker and personnel director for the Patriots who had spent years trying to land an NFL franchise for a group of Orlando investors. "I was pushing interracial ownership," said Loudd. "The NFL still does not have any black owners or general managers. Management is all white while 40% of the players are black."

Feeling he was losing hope of ever getting an NFL franchise (the fee at the time was $16 million), Loudd wired Davidson who brought Wheeler and Loudd's group together. Within a month the Orlando people purchased the staggering franchise and put it on its feet in Orlando. That left Wheeler with a big smile and, he claimed, "a very favorable return." He said the sale price was $3.2 million; Loudd said it was about half that much, and part of that amount was to cover outstanding bills. How much of a profit Wheeler actually turned is up to conjecture, but the very fact that he came out of the mess smiling enhanced the credibility of Davidson and his league.

"The season that year was very strange," quarterback Bob Davis said, "We played 24 games that year. The team started in Washington as the Ambassadors. Then, about a month prior to training camp, the team couldn't negotiate a stadium lease and we became the Norfolk [*actually, Virginia*] Ambassadors. Then, all of a sudden, we were bought by a guy from Orlando and we became the Florida Blazers."

Loudd at first wanted to call his new team the Orlando Suns, but Southern California protested, saying they had the rights to the "Sun" name. Loudd then settled on Florida Blazers.

The team would have to play its home games in the tiny Tangerine Bowl, which at the time sat only 14,000 people, hardly big enough for a minor-league team. Loudd had to buy and ship portable bleachers from the Rose Parade in Pasadena, California to bring attendance up to something close to a major-league level. The locker rooms were small and cramped, and became stifling hot when filled with a team full of players and coaches. Defensive tackle Paul Vellano said that the players would have to keep their clothes and other belongings off the floor because the showers would flood the entire locker room. But, such as it was, the team finally had a home.

With all the uncertainty surrounding the team, the franchise could at least say that at a personnel level, things were running smoothly. That was because Pardee brought a sense of order and calm to the franchise, as he built a lineup filled with veterans, with the emphasis on defense. When Pardee invaded the NFL to sign a player, he followed his old boss's emphasis on defense and came up with Bill Bergey of the Cincinnati Bengals. "He is the best middle linebacker in football," said Pardee. "He's like Dick Butkus before his legs went bad." Bergey's defection prompted the Bengals to go to court, the first legal action taken by the NFL against the new league (and certainly *not* the last!). Bergey's move was upheld, although he couldn't report to the Blazers until 1976.

The Tangerine Bowl hardly made the franchise look major league, and at times, and despite the addition of the extra seats, it barely looked minor league. Chairs had to be carted up through the stands to the press box. The ticket booths were a couple of old trailers. City inspectors did not declare the new bleachers safe and sound until the day of the game. When the man welding the goalposts was asked if they were guaranteed, he answered facetiously, "Only until I drive my truck out of here." One of the co-owners took the man at his word, however, and insisted the posts be propped up with 2-by-4s. Thankfully, he was ignored.

In the home opener, the crowd was modest—announced at 18,625—and last-minute preparations had been rushed. When the scoreboard lights finally flashed on before the game, the workers cheered.

On a hot and muggy night in Orlando, the Blazers edged The Hawaiians 8-7 in the opener, as the Wiffle's best innovation—the action point—made the difference in the game. Bob Davis passed to running back Jim Strong for a successful action point after the Blazers touchdown, while The Hawaiians missed theirs. The touchdown, a 2-yard run by Strong, was set up when linebacker Billy Hobbs stripped the ball from quarterback Billy Donckers and the fumble was recovered by defensive tackle Paul Vellano at The Hawaiians 10-yard line.

A blocked field goal by 6'6" defensive end John Ricca with 3:30 left in the game sealed the win.

"I was lucky I guess," Ricca said afterward in the Blazers' steamy locker room, "I just got my hands up."

The game did not provide the wide open offensive excitement promised by the WFL honchos, and in fact was a fairly drab affair. Neither team generated much offense at all, as both teams committed numerous mistakes, and at times were even more conservative than the NFL brand of football the new league claimed to want to distance itself from.

Florida then traveled to Detroit and squeaked by with another close victory, 18-14 before a sparse crowd in Ypsilanti. The offense put together an 83-yard, 17-play, nine-minute drive in the last quarter on their way to the winning touchdown, a 5-yard run by Reamon.

"We took our time. We were determined to be patient and not make any mistakes," said Davis, "We had plenty of time."

A goal line stand at the end of the game spearheaded by linebacker Eddie Sheats saved the day.

"That's a tough way to win them but we got it," said Pardee, "I just hope we don't have to count on Eddie every game like that."

Back home a week later, the Blazer defense smothered the Houston Texans, 15-3 on a drizzly night in the T-Bowl before another disappointing crowd of 15,829. The Blazers held Houston to 168 yards in total offense and forced four turnovers. Tommy Reamon rushed for a game-high 73 yards and a 15-yard touchdown that was set up by when Vellano recovered a fumble by quarterback Mike Taliaferro at the Houston 16.

In the second half of the home-and-home series, however, Houston returned the favor, edging Florida 7-6 in the Astrodome. It was another dull, offensive bust in which the only fireworks were generated by the Astrodome scoreboard. The Blazer offense was horrible, gaining a mere 76 total yards. Billy Hobbs had to punt a league-record 11 times. Florida was also flagged for a WFL-record 16 penalties for 136 yards. "We just got whipped," said Bob Davis, who was sacked six times and intercepted twice.

"We didn't play with any emotion," added Pardee, "I don't know what happened. We didn't come up with the big plays on offense and we didn't make the big plays on defense. We beat ourselves with the penalties. We just didn't play good."

Although they were 3-and-1, the Blazers weren't given much of a chance against the Chicago Fire,

undefeated and boasting one of the league's top offenses. The Fire was coming off a 53-29 win over The Hawaiians—a team the Blazers had barely beaten 8-7 in the first week of the season.

Sure enough, on August 7th, the Fire exploded for 21 second quarter points and took a 21-16 halftime lead over the Blazers. The 31,193 fans in Soldier Field figured that this was just the beginning, and that the Fire would continue to light up the scoreboard in the second half.

The scoreboard lit up in the second half all right, but it was the Blazers who lit it up, and not the Fire.

The complexion of the game changed early in the third quarter, on one play, a scintillating blocked punt and touchdown return by rookie cornerback Leonard Bryant. "It was the greatest thing I've ever seen," said Louis Ross.

When asked if the punt rush was on, Bryant answered, "No. When I lined up, I heard one of their linemen tell another lineman to take the inside man. I said to myself, 'Who's going to take me?"

The Blazers, who forced seven turnovers, never looked back after that as Billy Hobbs returned an interception 30 yards for a touchdown, and Richard James scored on two touchdown runs—while becoming the first Blazer to rush for 100 yards in a game—as Florida came out on top with a 46-21 upset win.

"The game was a complete turnabout from last week," said Jack Pardee, referring to the 7-6 loss to Houston. "Bob Davis had plenty of time to pass. We had the blocking advantage because of Chicago's three-man defensive line."

Bill Clark, writing in the *Orlando Sentinel-Star*, said, "Soldier Field was as quiet as the White House must have been Wednesday night." Clark was referring to the fact that Richard Nixon was probably contemplating what to tell the American public when he announced his resignation the very next day, August 8th.

Like Nixon, it was obvious that Florida was heading for trouble, except theirs was the financial kind. The Blazers were not drawing well at home and the small crowds on the road guaranteed pitiful gate receipt payoffs as well. Loudd was trying to skate by on the gate receipts alone and that was simply not going to cut it. The team was also hurt by the fact that the low candlepower generated by the lights in the Tangerine Bowl made it impossible to televise the team's home games, meaning the franchise missed out on more possible revenue.

Then it was discovered that the attendance figures for the first two home games were smaller than first thought. According to an IRS audit, only 11,484 people paid to get into the home opener. For the second game two weeks later, the figure was adjusted to only 10,802 paying customers. Officially, the Blazers had sold only 22,248 tickets for their first two games combined. Now the first signs of trouble had appeared on the horizon. In a move to help ticket sales, the team dropped ticket prices for end-zone seats from $7 to $2.50, but the decrease did not help the sagging attendance figures.

Loudd had to spend more of his meager budget to fly to Toronto and pry defensive end Louis Ross from his contract with the Argonauts of the CFL.

Loudd, who like Al Davis, had taken the title of Managing General Partner (and please, the comparison stops there!) had been hassling with city officials, and was searching for investors. "We've been talking with people from Lauderdale," said Loudd, "Yes we are talking about a big interest. But I can't identify the group because as yet nothing has materialized. I met with two from the group recently and will meet with two more of them."

Asked before their next game, against the Jacksonville Sharks, about the team's financial state, Bob Davis, said, "I'm not concerned about attendance. I'm just concerned about the Sharks and beating them.

"Sure, I'd like to see a full house," Davis went on, "but that's the front office's problem. I can't worry about that."

Pardee, meanwhile, was using the intrastate rivalry as an opportunity to fire up his football team.

"From the start, Jacksonville has been slapping Orlando in the face," Pardee said, "saying they are ahead of us in everything—a better stadium, more support. They've treated Orlando like a stepchild."

Pardee also responded to reports that Jacksonville coach Bud Asher had said that the Blazers had the best record in the division because they had played a weaker schedule.

"I've seen statements made and heard things on the grapevine that simply they have the best team," Pardee stated, "I haven't forgotten those kinds of things."

Pardee would use this "us vs. them" tactic, portraying his team as the league's ugly stepchildren, to motivate his players for the rest of the season; a tactic, by the way, that worked very well.

"I don't know of another man who could've gotten so much out of his players," linebacker Billy Hobbs would say, "Jack held the whole ship together."

On August 14th, 23,890 fans, the best and by far most vocal crowd of the season, came out to watch the Blazers build a 31-11 lead and then hold off their cross-state rivals, the Jacksonville Sharks, 33-26.

Jim Strong rushed for a pair of touchdowns, Bob Davis scored on a one-yard quarterback sneak, and Tommy Reamon lofted a 51-yard halfback option pass to Matt Maslowski for yet another score. John Ricca and Ernie Calloway sacked quarterback Reggie Oliver for a safety in the last quarter to cap the Blazers' scoring.

Florida was doing well on the field, leading the Eastern Division with a record of 5-and-1, but their off-the-field troubles continued. After the Jacksonville game, any Blazer player that wanted to shave had to share the one razor that could be found.

Two days later came more bad news. The New England Colonials of the Atlantic Coast Football League announced they were seeking a restraining order against the Wiffle to keep several of their former players from playing in the new league. Three of the Blazers' best players—Eddie Sheats, Ron Maree and Rod Foster—were named in the order, so now, on top of everything else, the Blazers had to worry about losing three of their top players.

At the same time Loudd, who referred to the T-Bowl as a "pig pen," was trying to schedule his team's remaining home games in either Tampa or Atlanta. Neither place was interested, with Georgia Tech flatly turning down his request to use the university's Grant Field. A rumored move to Dallas never materialized. In the *Ocala Star-Banner*, Mick Elliott wrote that the Blazers should "include a change of address card in its press releases."

The players didn't seem to be very worried about all the rumored moves. "I don't care if we play our home games in Tel Aviv or Beirut," said wide receiver Billy Walik, "The only thing we (the players) are interested in now is winning the WFL title."

Loudd was convinced that fans stayed away from the Tangerine Bowl because he was black, and that Orlando and Orange County were both giving him a bad deal. "If I'd been a white man," Loudd said bitterly, "things here would have been somewhat different." The county did attempt to break the lease the team had on the T-Bowl. Loudd and his business partner, majority owner David Williams Jr., would wind up suing each other.

On the eve of their next game against Portland, the Blazers were able to breathe a sigh of relief when the Atlantic Coast Football League's request for a restraining order—which could have cost the Blazers the services of Ron Maree, Eddie Sheats and Rod Foster—was denied.

That night Florida hosted the winless Storm in the rain, before another disappointing crowd of 15,451 people. Bob Davis pulled a Namath before the game, "guaranteeing" that Florida would make the playoffs. The Blazers were favored by 15 points against the Storm, but looked flat and barely squeaked by with an 11-7 win. Davis hooked up with Greg Latta for a 20-yard touchdown and Les Perry added a 24-yard field goal after a scoreless first half.

Then, when payday arrived after the Portland game, most of the players' checks bounced. "I still have the check," said wide receiver Matt Maslowski, "I took the check down to the bank for deposit and it was returned 'NSF.'"

"They told me at the bank that the check was no good," said safety Chuck Beatty.

Team officials promised the players that the money was forthcoming. But it never came. The Blazers wouldn't be paid by management for the last three months of the season. Many of them would experience incredible financial hardships, quite a few of them reportedly surviving on McDonald's meal vouchers.

"You've heard of hungry football teams?" Jack Pardee's wife, Phyllis, once told a reporter. "The Blazers really were *hungry*."

"I was trying to touch dreams . . . literally eating all my breakfasts, lunches, and dinners at McDonald's," recalled Reamon, who led all WFL rushers that season with 1,576 yards and 11 touchdowns. "It was quite awhile before I could eat at McDonald's again.

"Looking back to the World Football League," Reamon continued, "I can say it challenged and prepared me for what manhood was all about. Without it, I wouldn't be here, teaching and coaching today."

The Blazers had to endure a lot of hardships due to the lack of paychecks.

Wide receiver Hubie Bryant couldn't even afford to pay his paperboy and couldn't cash a personal check. Running back Jim Strong had his electricity shut off and had to send his wife and son back to Houston to stay with family. "Once I went to my regular gas station for some work on my car, and the manager refused to accept my check," said defensive end John Ricca. Many of the players took to rooming with each other to save money, and also saved cash by getting free meals from the booster club. Guard Tim Brannan said there were a "couple restaurants where we can get a free meal if necessary."

Pardee personally bought toilet paper for the Blazers' home locker room, and wasn't immune to the problems. He said he went to a store and handed the clerk a $20 bill, and the clerk said something about the bill being counterfeit. Another time, his wife went to the store, and the manager, knowing the check she

wrote would be no good, followed her home and took the groceries back to the store.

"I can honestly say that my one year with the Blazers gave me some of the best and worst experiences of my life," said Pardee, whose first head coaching job was supposed to pay him $50,000 (but didn't).

Pardee later coached teams in the NFL, United States Football League and Canadian Football League, as well as the collegiate level, but probably learned more about finances in 12 months with the Blazers than anywhere else.

"I never knew there could be such a thing as a bad *certified* check," said Pardee, "until I worked in the World Football League."

On the very same day that the Pardees closed on their new home in Orlando, the Blazers stopped issuing checks. If not for a group of benevolent nuns with big hearts, all the Pardee children might have been yanked out of their Catholic school.

"I knew I was taking a little risk when I left the NFL as far as the financial stability," said Pardee years later, "But to have a chance to be a head coach, I thought it was worth the risk.

"We would have to get advance money to fly or to put a game on. But meantime, how do you live day to day when you can't get your laundry done, or buy toilet paper for the bathroom or get your cleaning supplies around the facility?

"Without money you can't afford to do all of that. You know we had a good team going by then. We were one of the better teams in the league and we had a group of young players that were trying to prove that they could play professional football.

"As a coach if the bathrooms needed a cleaning, or if you are out of toilet paper, if the laundry had to be done and the soap had to be bought as a way to keep the team together, if a light bulb burns out, who is going to replace it?"

Pardee himself took care of things like that. He kept the team alive with his own money to help pay for the team's and players' daily necessities.

"The people in Orlando were great to them," said Pardee. "Everybody knew the plight of the Florida Blazers. I know there were apartment owners who cut guys slack. Things were a little bit slow around Orlando then. The restaurants would pop for meals for guys and we got McDonald's gift certificates and laundries gave the guys free cleanings. It was kind of a community effort to keep the team going."

Linebacker Larry Grantham, formerly of the New York Jets, who had survived the days of Harry Wismer and the financially-strapped Titans, stated: "I don't think I've learned a lot about cashing checks this season, but I've learned a lot about football from Jack Pardee and I've learned a lot about people. It's been one hell of an experience."

"I remember playing games in the Tangerine Bowl and the repo man pulling up in the parking lot and towing the players' cars away during the game!" recalled defensive tackle Mike McBath.

In week eight, Florida hosted Memphis, and welcomed back veteran wide receiver Gary Collins, returning from a pre-season shoulder injury. He caught a 25-yard touchdown pass from Bob Davis, but the Blazers lost, 26-18 before 17,148 people in the T-Bowl, as the Southmen rushed for 251 yards and forced two turnovers.

A week later in Birmingham, the Blazers faced the undefeated Americans. After a scoreless first half, Florida took the lead on Tommy Reamon's 43-yard catch of a Bob Davis aerial. The Blazers held the unbeaten Americans scoreless for three quarters, but Matthew Reed stepped off the Birmingham bench and sparked his offense to life. The Americans tied it with 5:10 left in the game, and a successful action point gave Birmingham its first lead, 8-7. The Blazers had three more possessions but could do nothing with any of them, and wound up losing their second game in a row.

"We beat ourselves," said Davis after the game, "We dropped passes, and we had penalties that really hurt. We just stopped ourselves."

"We knew they were strong finishers," said Jack Pardee, "We did everything we set out to do but put points on the board. Reed always seems to come up with the big plays under pressure. He stayed in there and fought the pressure."

Besides the game, another big loss for the Blazers was defensive lineman Ernie Calloway, who left the game in the third quarter with a knee injury.

"It could be serious," said Pardee, "We're not sure what kind of injury it is, but he could be out for the rest of the year and it will weaken our defensive line considerably."

Next up for Florida were the New York Stars. It was a battle for first place in the Eastern Division as both teams entered the game with identical 6-and-3 records. When the Blazers arrived at their hotel in the city, it would not accept the team's check. Pardee had to pay for the accommodations with his credit card.

New York said it sold almost 15,000 advance sale tickets for the game, and fully expected their biggest crowd of the season. But Hurricane Carmen arrived in town with the Blazers, and heavy rains drenched the city. Because of the terrible weather, only 3,830

people, the smallest crowd up to that point in the WFL, showed up at Downing Stadium. Most of them hid in the runways to escape the downpours.

The game was played in a quagmire. The poor lighting in Downing Stadium didn't help matters. Pardee finally had to station assistant coaches five yards apart on the sidelines so the offense could gauge where it was going. Bob Davis hurt his knee and missed the second half. But the Blazers overcame the weather, the mud, the darkness and the injuries to stop the Stars, 17-15. Tommy Reamon, in his first start of the season, ran for a league-record 179 yards and a 28-yard touchdown.

The Blazers returned home to a small crowd of 11,511 that saw Florida get embarrassed by winless Detroit, 15-14. It was their third loss in four games and pushed them back into a tie with New York for the Eastern Division lead. The Blazers had 20 first downs, 369 yards in total offense, sacked Detroit quarterback Bubba Wyche six times, and at one point even got five downs instead of four, but nothing could stop the Wheels from upsetting Florida for their first—and as it turned out only—win of the season.

The halftime fireworks display at the Tangerine Bowl provided more entertainment than the whole first half did, which ended with Florida up 7-0. But the fireworks must have awakened the Detroit offense, which had been outgained 205 yards to 44 in the first half. The Wheels scored twice in the third quarter to take a surprising 15-7 lead.

Bob Davis, a questionable starter after hurting his knee the week before in New York, then drove the Blazers 80 yards in 6 plays, needing just three-and-a-half minutes to draw the Blazers to within one at 15-14 on a two-yard run by Tommy Reamon. But Greg Latta dropped the action point pass and Florida remained a point shy.

The Blazers had two chances to reverse the score. But their next possession ended in an interception. Their defense gave Florida one more shot with 1:09 left. Davis scrambled for five yards and then hit Latta for 31 more and a first down at the Detroit 38 with 42 seconds left.

Here's where the Blazers got a little help from the officials. Davis threw incomplete on first down, and then hit Matt Maslowski on a wide turn-in pattern to the Detroit 29. But when Maslowski tried to get out of bounds to stop the clock, he was wrestled down in-bounds and the clock ticked merrily away. Davis then threw the ball out of bounds to stop the clock.

That made it fourth down, but the sideline marker said third down. With eight seconds left, Davis threw deep but incomplete. With four seconds left, Davis then got a fifth down to try and win it. But thankfully his pass down the middle was batted harmlessly to earth, avoiding a possible controversy, and the Blazers had been upset, 15-14, their third loss in four games.

"We took the night off," said Jack Pardee, "It's no one thing really. It was just a total collapse. We're going back to training camp and do things the right way."

"We lacked the killer instinct," offered Maslowski.

"You've just got to be ready to play every week," said Larry Grantham, "I thought we were ready."

The next game was another important matchup, as the Blazers hosted the Philadelphia Bell. Florida and New York were tied for the Eastern Division lead, both at 7-and-4, with Philadelphia just two games back at 5-and-6. The game pitted the Number One passing offense in the league against the Number One passing defense. But one of the biggest contests of the season drew the smallest crowd, as a season-low total of only 10,417 fans bothered to show up at the Tangerine Bowl. Not only that, the Blazers had now gone four games without pay. On top of *that*, when some of the players were introduced, the crowd actually booed.

The Florida players put all that aside, however. They picked off four passes, held the Bell's leading rusher, John Land, to 16 yards on the ground, and then scored the winner with 17 seconds left on a 12-yard pass from Davis to Greg Latta. The Blazers won, 24-21, and when New York lost to The Hawaiians, Florida once again had a one-game lead in the division.

"They had five backs in there, but I worked on their new man (rookie Zaven Yaralian)," said Davis of his winning touchdown pass to Latta, "It was his first game, and I thought we could move it on him." Davis, one of the players who were booed, completed 14 of 23 passes for 146 yards and the winning score.

"Sure I heard the boos," said Davis afterward, "but it just makes me play harder. I'm sure a lot of people didn't think we could make the winning drive, but I did."

"A Florida Blaze is hotter than a Chicago Fire" said one hand-painted banner that greeted the Blazers on Banner Night at the Tangerine Bowl, where 16,679 people came out to watch the Blazers take on Chicago. Greg Boeck referred to the team in the *Sentinel Star* as the "play now, pay later Blazers." Florida racked up 482 yards in total offense, and put together scoring drives of 74, 83, 80 and 77 yards. Their defense stopped the Fire five times inside the 37-yard line to preserve their first shut out of the season, 29-0.

Rumors started making the rounds that the Blazers were going to be taken over by the league. Reports came out that the county was on the verge of suing the team in an effort to terminate the club's lease with the Tangerine Bowl, saying that the team had failed to live up to the agreements of the lease. The negative publicity caused ticket sales to vanish. After the stories broke, the team sold exactly three tickets for their next home game.

Florida traveled to Philadelphia to face the Bell in another key Eastern Division match-up. Despite the front office and financial turmoil, the Blazers managed to whip the Bell, 30-7 as the defense picked off four passes. Tommy Reamon rushed for 130 yards and scored one touchdown rushing and another one on a reception.

"Reamon gives me a diversified weapon," said Davis, "He practices seriously and gives you second effort. He doesn't give in to the tacklers."

Meanwhile, Loudd continued searching the country for investors after the league did indeed take control of the team from him and handed it over temporarily to Pardee. He obviously knew how to build a team, he just didn't seem to know how to get people to come out and watch it.

Florida was in Chicago again a week later to play the Fire for no less than the third time in the season. No, that isn't a typo and no, it wasn't a scheduling glitch; the Blazers were originally scheduled to play Jacksonville, but when that franchise was bumped from the league schedule, the Blazers instead went to the Windy City again. They had feasted on the Fire twice before, and did it again, this time by a count of 45-17. The league's Number One defense forced five turnovers and held Chicago to two touchdowns, while thwarting six other penetrations inside their 40-yard-line, to win their fourth game in a row. Tommy Reamon ran for 84 yards and went over 1,000 yards for the season.

After the game, the Chicago press asked the Blazers about their lack of pay.

"Everybody, especially the press, keeps bugging us on how are we able to play without being paid since late August," said Reamon, "Man, we are not worried about it. Coach Pardee says we are going to get paid, and we will get paid. The man is straight with us."

"These guys really love each other," offered wide receiver Matt Maslowski, "A team reflects its head coach, and I've never met a human being like Jack Pardee."

"Our players make up their minds to separate their problems off the field from their problems on the field," responded Pardee, "They're not worried about pay. Maybe adversity is bringing them closer together. I don't know."

Riding a four-game winning streak, Florida traveled to Memphis to play the Southmen, who were on a 10-game winning streak of their own.

The day before the game, the league office forwarded overdue paychecks to the Blazer players. "This takes the immediate strain and pressure off," said Pardee. "We needed this relief badly. Without this money, it would have been tough to go on much longer."

"I hope their disposition has improved since they got paid," joked Memphis coach John McVay. It may have improved their disposition but did not help their quality of play. The Blazers were victimized by two interceptions, two fumbles and eight penalties as the Southmen built an 18-0 lead and won, 25-15 for their 11th win in a row and 14th in 16 contests.

The Blazers not only lost the game in Memphis, but were then told by the WFL that because of legal action by Rommie Loudd, the paychecks they had received were no good. The league had stopped payment on them.

"I had written checks for bills I owed," wide receiver Hubie Bryant said angrily, "Now all those checks are no good!"

Florida was scheduled to host the Charlotte franchise next. Charlotte was the old New York team, which headed south when the money ran out. It was yet again another important match-up, as Florida, 11-and-5, led Charlotte, with a record of 10-and-6, by only one game in the standings.

Less than a week before the game, however, the league claimed there was a big demand to hold the game in Charlotte. The Wiffle promised the Blazers a payout of $75,000 or 50% of the gate if they agreed to move the game. They also assured the team that the October 30th game against Birmingham would not be moved from Orlando, and that the Blazers would host a playoff game (If they made the playoffs, that is!). Florida agreed.

But the players, unpaid in seven weeks, threatened to boycott the game. They met on the 19th, but in the end voted to play.

"We are professionals and we will honor our contracts," said Bob Davis.

"It's awful tough to walk out and turn your backs on guys that you've practiced with and played with for a couple months," said Paul Vellano.

In Charlotte, Davis threw two second-half touchdown passes, Tommy Reamon broke his own rushing record with 189 yards, and the Blazers edged the Hornets, 15-11 in their battle for first place. The win

left Florida with a record of 12-and-5, and Charlotte two games behind at 10-and-7.

"Despite all the furor over not being paid and the franchise not moving, the guys came to play," said Pardee, "I'm sold on these guys. I give the team a lot of credit for not letting some real bad off-the-field distractions affect their play on the field. We stopped their running and did an even better job on their passing attack." The Blazers registered four sacks and held the Hornets to 43 yards through the air.

After the game, the big payoff proved to be another in a series of empty promises the team had endured all season long. After some bills were paid, each player received a check for only $200.

On the 28th, two days before their next game, the Blazers were told they had 10 days to seal a contract with the team's intended buyers or face a temporary order not to sell the franchise.

In what he called a "put up or get out" decision, Orange County Circuit Judge Claude Edwards also ordered David Williams, Jr., to increase the bond he posted with the court to $500,000 by noon on the 29th. Williams had put up a $5,000 bond after winning a temporary restraining order on the 23rd, which was his attempt to halt the sale of the team to undisclosed buyers for a reported $1.5 million.

Edwards said his order would be automatically lifted and the team then could be sold at any time if Williams did not post the bond to insure payment of players' salaries and other debts. [*The posting of a bond is a common practice in injunction suits as a means of protecting the parties being restrained—you really needed a law degree to follow the goings-on surrounding the WFL*]. If both the Blazers and Williams met the court's provisions, Edwards said he would then hold further hearings to review both the contract and Williams' reasons for trying to stop the sale.

By this time, Williams and Blazer managing partner Rommie Loudd had started proceedings to sue each other and the WFL. Williams and Loudd both claimed that the other conspired with the league to drive the team into financial difficulty in order to force its sale. Williams, who said he had a million dollars invested in the Blazers, claimed the league would make $300,000 from a sale. He said Loudd and the league were trying to sell the team without his knowledge or consent. The Blazer players were already owed numerous weeks back pay and several companies had begun filing law suits in an attempt to force the Blazers to pay its bills.

The next game was supposed to be a home game against Birmingham in Orlando, but despite promises that the game would not be moved, the contest was switched to Birmingham, the league saying that more people would attend a game in Birmingham than they would in Orlando. Again, the move was made with the promise that the Blazers would get a piece of the gate. "The fans were behind us," recalled safety Chuck Beatty in a recent interview, "there was decent support. But there was not enough, and we wound up going on the road in order to get a piece of the gate."

The Blazers had to take a commercial flight to Birmingham as promised expense money did not arrive in time.

Birmingham hadn't lost at home all season, and didn't lose to the Blazers, moving out to a 23-7 lead and winning 26-18. A small crowd of just over 21,000 guaranteed that the Blazers would receive about half of what had been promised them to move the game to Birmingham. The check the team received hardly made a dent in their growing debts.

Despite the financial hardships, the Blazers hung tough and hung together, forming a bond that few teams have ever enjoyed. The Blazers just circled the wagons and were determined to succeed despite all the problems they faced on a seemingly daily basis. Their owners were feuding, their fans were staying away in droves, and their league was turning its back on them. The only thing they could depend on was each other.

"After ten years in pro football, I've found out what the game is all about with these people," said Rickie Harris. "I love these guys."

"You had to either laugh or cry," Pardee remembers, "We chose to laugh."

One way the Blazers laughed at adversity was by presenting a weekly "UMOT" award. Each week, running back A.D. Whitfield would get up in front of everyone after the team meeting and do the honors.

"He would start off by critiquing the offensive and defensive plays," Matt Maslowski recalled, "It was very officious. A.D. would keep very good notes on who looked good and who didn't. Then at the end of this meeting, he would present the 'UMOT' award—'The Ugliest Man on the Team.' We made this scepter out of tin foil, and had a cape for the winner.

"The Florida Blazers were a special team," Maslowski added, "We went through a lot of hardships, and still had a lot of good times along the way. We all learned that there are more important things in life than money or fame—I love those guys.

"I think what established the Florida Blazers as a great team," Maslowski continued, "was the caring, the camaraderie, the love that we had for each other. When you get forty guys on the same page, from the

highest paid to the lowest paid, to the non-paid, it was a . . . we looked out for each other. It didn't matter if it was offense, defense, white, black, or whatever, we were one team."

Offensive tackle Ron Maree maintained that the 1974 season he spent with the penniless Blazers "was the most fun I ever had playing professional football."

"It was astonishing that we stayed together for the entire season and continued our quest to get into the playoffs despite the club's financial situation," Bob Rush remembered, "This was attributed to the leadership of Jack Pardee and his staff, as well as the bond we felt as players. An unforgettable experience."

"That was a helluva team," Chuck Beatty recalled in a recent interview, "We really went through a lot. Despite not getting paid, though, it was a fun time."

"We were young, dumb and poor," said Larry Ely, "and loving every minute of it."

Back home for the first time since September 26th, the Blazers shut out the resurgent Portland Storm, 23-0, on November 7th. The fans were no more supportive than they had been earlier in the season, as only 11,676 people were on hand. The Blazers' "bend but don't break" defense stopped Portland six times within its own 30-yard-line. Florida capitalized on two Portland fumbles and a 56-yard kickoff return by Richard James. A 23-point third quarter turned a 0-0 nail biter into a breeze.

In their season finale, the Blazers hit the West Coast to play the Western Division Champion Southern California Sun. Florida rolled out to a 24-7 halftime lead, then saw that evaporate as the Sun staged a comeback and tied the game late in the fourth quarter at 24. Florida had to punt, and Billy Hobbs got off a beauty that was downed by linebacker Bob Rush at the one-yard line.

Southern California was content to let the clock run out and send the game into overtime, but Pardee used his timeouts to perfection and the Sun were finally forced to punt with 12 seconds left.

At the snap, Eddie Sheats rushed in and partially blocked the kick, which fluttered to the ground at the 8-yard line where the Blazers recovered. Pardee rushed his kicking team onto the field, and Dave Strock, brother of NFL quarterback Don Strock, kicked the winning 25-yard field goal as time ran out.

"I'm very proud of this team," said Pardee, "No one really knows the adversity we have overcome. All year long we've had to react in tight situations and tonight was no different. We stuck together again."

The Blazers' long grueling season was finally over. Tommy Reamon led the Wiffle in rushing with 1,576 yards, and Bob Davis passed for 3,079 yards and led the league by completing 54.8 % of his passes.

The defense allowed the fewest touchdowns and fewest points in the WFL, and registered 58 quarterback sacks, most in the league.

But this team was more than just statistics. It was a perfect example of the "whole being greater than the sum of its parts." They did the things a researcher or statistician can not quantify. Like any great team, they had banded together, trusted each other, helped each other, supported each other, and found success against some very long odds.

The Blazers played about two-thirds of their season for free. Yet somehow, thanks mostly to Pardee, morale was never an issue. That's because Pardee always liked to remember his Blazer players at the least-needy, most persistent, and least-egotistical group that he would ever coach.

The Blazers had demonstrated a determination, sense of purpose and just plain stubbornness rarely seen in the world of sports or anywhere else for that matter. What they accomplished may only be rivaled by the resolve displayed by Teruo Nakamura, a Japanese soldier who on December 30th, 1974, finally surrendered on the Indonesian Island of Morota, over 30 years after the end of World War II. Like the Blazers, ol' Teruo didn't know when to quit.

On January 1st, 1975, Pardee was hired to take over as head coach of the NFL's Chicago Bears.

Pardee, who had steered the Blazers' floundering ship to a 14-and-6 record and the Eastern Division championship, mainly with his calm, cool demeanor and his keen sense of humor, said as he departed, "At least I won't have to worry about the cleaners coming to repossess our uniforms at halftime."

The league tried to meet with David Williams, Jr. in an effort to resuscitate the moribund franchise. But the reclusive millionaire failed to show up at three appointments and Chris Hemmeter, the new WFL President, decided to break off negotiations.

"There's no reason to believe the Blazers will be back in Orlando next year," said player rep Mike McBath, who also predicted the league would soon announce that the beleaguered franchise was finally dead and buried, "And I feel certain that if the Blazers aren't going to exist in 1975, we can write off professional football here forever."

The league said an official announcement concerning the franchise would be made in March, the deadline for Hemmeter's reorganization plan to field at least six financially solid teams in '75.

A spokesman for Williams said that "things aren't looking that good." Blazer linebacker Larry Grantham, who was said to be in line to coach the team in '75, said the WFL leadership was "upset because they couldn't get in touch with Williams. I understand they were ready to call it off because of his (Williams) actions."

"Obviously, if there is no interest on the part of ownership to stay here, why should Hemmeter waste his time chasing down a dream when he's got other areas to worry about?" McBath said.

McBath speculated that the franchise might move to Akron, Ohio, saying that Akron advertising executive Jerry Donizetti was introduced as a new franchise owner at a WFL executive meeting in Toronto. The veteran defensive tackle predicted that most of the Blazers would make the move to Akron if the deal could be worked out.

"A lot of guys will tell you they're not going to move, but my answer is that simple economics will force them to," said the Blazers' player rep, "Where else can a defensive lineman who is out of work have a chance to make $25,000 a year?"

Lee Spence was a 17-year-old fan back in 1974, who followed the Blazers faithfully. He collected newspapers articles, programs, anything he could get his hands on, and also went to games at the T-Bowl. He recalled the team folding and having their equipment sold in auction. He said he was so upset that he did not watch football for two years.

"I still remember that 1974 season," recalled Spence, "and all that the players went through, not getting paid but still playing out the rest of the season for the love of the game . . . They don't men like that anymore."

Or teams like the Florida Blazers anymore.

CHAPTER 8

Lei'd Off

The Hawaiians, 1974

"Dan Rogers was hired to be the first general manager of the Hawaiian franchise, and he was given a lifetime contract. It wasn't too long after that, the owner called and said, 'I'm sorry, Danny, but I'm afraid you're dead.'"

—TIM GRANDI, associate general counsel for the WFL

After Ben Hatskin was forced to bow out due to illness, Danny Rogers became caretaker of the proposed Hawaii franchise. Rogers had been an All-American basketball player at USC and was the licensing director for the WHA when asked by his pal Gary Davidson to hold on to the franchise until the real money men could be found.

There had been three minor league franchises that had been based in Honolulu. The first were the Warriors of the Pacific Coast Professional Football League, who operated from 1946 until the league dissolved in 1948. To cut travel costs, the Warriors played all their games at home. Hawaii finished first in both 1947 and '48, but was rocked by a scandal when members of the team were found to be placing bets on games in which they participated. Four team members were banned for life and ten others were suspended indefinitely. The team regularly played before crowds in the 15,000 range.

The Rangers, who operated as an independent team, was the second try at placing a team in The Sunshine State. They didn't last long.

In 1969, the Continental Football League included a team called the Hawaii Warriors, but the team moved to Portland during the season. The WFL, however, was the first time a major pro football league had attempted to place a team in the islands.

Rogers began looking for potential backers, and found not one but two. One of them was Sam Battistone, who had been named President of the Sambo's restaurant chain at the age of 27, and was also the principal owner of Invest West, Inc. The other was Chris Hemmeter, a Honolulu hotel and condominium magnate. Rogers was then named the team's General Manager.

The franchise was originally going to be called the Honolulu Warriors, but a local team had trademarked that name. As a result, the team was known simply as "The Hawaiians," although the press frequently mistakenly called them the "Honolulu Hawaiians" or the "Hawaii Hawaiians."

You would think setting up a team in a paradise like Hawaii would be a delight. Not so. The locals caused problems right from the beginning, insisting that mid-week football would not go over well in Hawaii. They were adamant that the team play its games on the more traditional Sunday. This resulted in a lot of confusion since one team had to play a different schedule than the rest of the league. It didn't do the visiting teams any good either, what with having to play on Wednesday or Thursday night, and then fly to Honolulu to play on Sunday afternoon.

Unfortunately, local and team officials quickly discovered that Sunday football did not go over well in Hawaii either. Because of awful attendance (which locals blamed on the high price of tickets), The Hawaiians finally had to give in, get with the program, join the rest of the league and switch their games from Sunday afternoon to Wednesday and / or Thursday night.

The franchise also made the mistake of allowing a same day tape delay of their home games, meaning many Hawaiians' fans could watch the game on TV later on that same day. Why would fans go out to the game when they could catch it on the tube in the comfort of their own home?

While the team played on Sundays, the league tried to help things by scheduling The Hawaiians' games, both home and away, in three- and four-game

blocks to cut down on expenses. Another cost-cutting measure had the team holding their training camp at the University of California-Riverside.

"There was always the problem of having to move five hours off the West Coast," said owner Chris Hemmeter, "That wasn't a problem for teams in California and Portland, but if you are coming from Orlando, Chicago, or New York, there was some expense and jet leg. So, that was a factor, but I think Hawaii added some glamour and notoriety to the WFL."

How glamorous it would be to play in Honolulu Stadium, an old, sagging wood and stone facility nicknamed "The Termite Palace" by the locals, remained to be seen. The facility had been built in 1926 when Calvin Coolidge was President, and its seating capacity was only 25,000 people. Babe Ruth had played there in 1933 on a barnstorming tour, and Elvis Presley performed there in 1957, but by the 1960's the facility had become outdated and had fallen on hard times.

The one positive thing about the stadium was that at least it was on the list for the wrecking ball, as the team was scheduled to move into the brand-new 50,000 seat Halawa Stadium in '75.

The Hawaiians represented the first attempt to form a major professional football organization outside the contiguous 48 States. With big-money men like Battistone and Hemmeter heading their investment group, the franchise might have succeeded if the WFL itself had been better run. They were one of only three teams that didn't miss a payroll during the league's first season.

Dude, Where's my Football Team?

The Hawaiians announced its team colors would be Island Brown, Royalty Red and Kona Gold. That was until team officials discovered that Kona Gold was a name for marijuana in Hawaii. The color's name was quickly changed to Sunset Gold.

Mike Giddings, who had been an assistant coach in charge of the linebackers with the 49ers for six years, was named the franchise's Head Coach. He picked Damon Bame, Matt Hazeltine, Marv Marinovich, Pete Riehlman, Bob Schloredt and Billy Wilson as his assistants.

"I think the interesting aspect of this season will be the fact that so many players will want to prove that they can play just as well as the people that will be coming in 1975," said Giddings.

Giddings was referring to the impressive list of football talent slated to join the club in 1975. The Hawaiians joined the parade and signed a long list of players to "future contracts" that would take effect after their NFL contracts expired with the 1974 or '75 seasons. These players, used to playing football in the cold, mud and snow of the Northeast and Midwest, were probably drawn to the attraction of playing in Hawaii in perfect weather and then attending a luau afterwards. The first of these players was signed on Tuesday, April 16th, when veteran NFL offensive tackle John Wilbur signed a future contract set to start in 1975 after his contract with the Redskins ran out.

"The Hawaiians have made me an offer which will guarantee security for my wife and two children for years to come," Wilbur told the press at a news conference. Wilbur would wind up being only the second man in pro football history—following George Halas—to be a player, coach and owner all at the same time.

Wilbur was just one of many players who The Hawaiians signed to "future contracts," as the franchise dove into the deep end of that pool. Three days after Wilbur signed, The Hawaiians inked Dallas defensive back Richmond Flowers to a future contract (In April, the team would trade his rights to Houston for future considerations). Running back Vin Clements, linebacker John Douglas and quarterback Randy Johnson of the Giants all signed, obviously drawn to the fact that fall and winter in Honolulu was much warmer than fall and winter in New York. The Hawaiians also signed center Ed Flanagan from the Lions, quarterback Edd Hargett from the Oilers, wide receiver John Isenbarger, tight end Ted Kwalick and linebacker Jim Sniadecki from the 49ers, and wide receiver John Gilliam from the Vikings.

Gilliam was an All-Pro receiver who had been his team's leading pass catcher five times. "I consider John in the top class of receivers in the NFL," said Mike Giddings, "John gives us scoring threats comparable to any in football."

Like other Wiffle teams, however, The Hawaiians' soon felt a money crunch because of these "future contracts." The bonuses that were agreed to and had to be paid out quickly emptied the franchise's coffers. The Hawaiians' deal with Gilliam showed just how irresponsible their owners and the other WFL owners would become just to grab a few headlines. Here's Gilliam's description of the agreement.

"It's three years, no cut," said Gilliam, "I get $150,000 up front. That's mine. I've got it in my contract that I don't have to give it back. That's money in the bank now. I've got a $200,000 paid-up insurance

policy. I can keep the insurance or cash it in and take the money when I'm done playing, but as long as I'm playing I'm insured for $200,000."

Gilliam was far from finished. "I get a $100,000 loan to shelter the other money," he went on, "You've got to have some money to invest for tax purposes. I get $100,000 a year for three years. And if I get hurt this year playing for Minnesota, and can't play in Hawaii the following year, I get 50 percent for three years. All of this is guaranteed.

"I also get transportation to Hawaii and trips for my family," Gilliam continued, "The whole package is worth about $580,000."

It's little wonder why the WFL teams struggled in 1974. While these deals looked good in the papers, they cost the Wiffle franchises—including The Hawaiians—a lot of paper. As in greenbacks. As Bob Oates wrote in Street and Smith's *1974 Pro Football Yearbook*, "Can you build a sound, viable league that way?"

But the big catch was Calvin Hill, star running back of the Cowboys. Hill had rushed for over 5,000 yards in six years with the Cowboys, and twice had gained over 1,000 yards in a season. Hill was named to four Pro Bowls and was All-Pro in 1969. Only once in 1970 had he averaged less than 4 yards a carry.

"I was just a number on the Cowboys," Hill said when asked why he jumped from Dallas to Honolulu, "someone who was expendable."

"Many of these players saw the WFL as an opportunity to finish their careers, or extend their careers, while trying to have a part in establishing a new league," said Hemmeter.

But for 1974, like other teams, The Hawaiians had trouble finding talent, and would obviously look anywhere for it. The team opened training camp at Cal-Riverside with 111 prospects. Head Coach Mike Giddings even gave a tryout to a 49-year-old kicker, plus a dentist who had played for Stanford in his college days. The process of finding talent hit a bit of a snag when Giddings was hospitalized for hip replacement surgery during camp and had to rely on his assistants and video tape to evaluate the players on hand.

The lure of playing in Hawaii was strong, and the team was able to sign 22 of its 36 college draft choices. Future NFLers Norris Weese, Jeff Sevy, Hal Stringert, Lem Burnham, and Karl Lorch were all rookies for the '74 Hawaiians.

Another rookie was quarterback Billy Donckers from San Diego State. Donckers had been released by the Patriots in 1973 and then spent that season with a minor league outfit named the Pierce County Bengals in something called the Northwest International League. Donckers got a tryout with the Hawaiians and won a job, this despite the fact that he was deaf and had to rely on lip reading to assist him with his hearing.

"I had to make sure Billy was facing me directly," said his college coach, Don Coryell, "so he could lip read while I talked to him."

The veterans listed on The Hawaiians preseason roster could literally be counted on one hand—Chargers' defensive linemen Ron East and Greg Wojcik; Raiders' linebacker Greg Slough; Jim Cadile, an 11-year veteran offensive tackle from the Bears; and CFL running back Dave Buchanan.

"East's Beasts"

The Hawaiians could boast of having one of the few defensive lines in the WFL that had a nickname—"East's Beasts," so named after NFL veteran defensive tackle Ron East, who led a four man front that also included rookies Levi Stanley, Karl Lorch and Lem Burnham. Both Lorch and Burnham would go on to success in the NFL. The foursome would be credited with 46 sacks, fourth highest total in the league, for 503 yards. Okay, so it didn't have the recognition of the "Steel Curtain," the "Purple People Eaters," or the "Fearsome Foursome," but "East's Beasts" certainly harassed their share of quarterbacks.

Hawaii was virgin territory when it came to pro football, but despite the fact that their only sports competition was the University of Hawaii and the minor-league baseball Islanders, The Hawaiians eventually struggled to survive like every other team in the WFL. The islands were not that densely populated, and while the team had a fan base, it was a small fan base. Attendance figures were depressingly low. At one point during the season, reports surfaced that the team was losing $200,000 for every home game they played.

"I remember when Dan Rogers was hired to be the first general manager of the Hawaiian franchise, and he was given a lifetime contract," says Tim Grandi. "It wasn't too long after that, the owner called and said, 'I'm sorry, Danny, but I'm afraid you're dead.'"

The Hawaiians had to travel 12 hours by plane to Orlando to open their season against the Florida Blazers. Giddings, who had taken to calling his young squad the "Kiddie Korps," said before the game, "The difference is they (the Blazers) have a bunch of pros and we have a bunch of kids. I just hope our kids can

play. We come into the game as distinct underdogs. Our only chance is to stay in the game early. We've got to come on with poise and hope we have enough athletes who are eager."

Giddings must have been wondering just what he got himself into when the team arrived at the tiny Tangerine Bowl.

"The league always seemed a little tentative to me," said the head coach, "When we got to Orlando, we went to the stadium and found them just cementing in the goal posts." The scoreboard, wired shortly before the game, also went on the blink during the last two minutes of the game.

As it turned out, the two teams really didn't need the scoreboard much at all. They played a dull, defensive game that was nothing like the kind of contest that the Wiffle founders had promised their new fanbase. The two teams totaled only 23 first downs and just 366 yards in total offense.

The Hawaiians also turned the ball over four times and missed two field goal tries. Still, the defense kept them in the game, and despite the offensive struggles, the team lost by only one point, 8-7.

"I know it's tough," said free agent rookie defensive back Hal Stringert, "We got so close and we lost. I know I could have done a little better. Everybody could have. There's only one place to go from here."

"I think it was our game down the line," said Levi Stanley, "We just didn't get the breaks."

"After we all got over the jitters we started to look like a ball club," added Norris Weese, "The offense was young, everyone made mistakes. I hope we can learn from this."

After their loss to Florida, The Hawaiians flew to their training camp at Cal-Riverside to prepare for their Week Two opponent, Southern California. Like the opener against the Blazers, The Hawaiians displayed little in the way of an offense during the first two quarters. In the first half, they failed to cross the 50 yard line even once, gained only 12 yards rushing and 10 passing, and fell behind the Sun, 15-0.

The Sun increased their lead to 23-0 in the third quarter. So far in 1974, The Hawaiians had played seven quarters of football and scored exactly seven points.

On top of that, The Hawaiians lost five players during the game to injuries: Stringert pulled a hamstring; linebacker Frank Johnson hurt a knee; tight end John Kelsey bruised some ribs; Norris Weese injured the thumb on his left hand, and tackle Neil Agness suffered a bad knee sprain. These injuries revealed the team's extreme lack of depth.

But despite being shorthanded, The Hawaiians' offense suddenly sprang to life in the fourth quarter.

Weese marched his team 49 yards in six plays, five of them passes, before hitting Kelsey in the end zone for a 12-yard touchdown to make it 23-8.

Even Alonzo Emery returning the ensuing kickoff 76 yards for a score failed to demoralize the suddenly red-hot Hawaiians. Weese directed another quick touchdown drive, hitting on seven passes, including a 10-yard touchdown to Grady Richardson, to make it 30-16.

The Sun matched that with a touchdown of its own, but that still didn't stop The Hawaiians. With Weese on the bench, second-string rookie Dennis Dummit came off the bench and promptly hit on three straight passes, the last one a touchdown to Tim Delaney.

"For the amount I played I was satisfied," said Dummit, who had the wind knocked out of him as he threw the scoring pass. So Weese, injured thumb and all came back off the bench to add the action point to make it 38-23.

The comeback continued. Defensive back Jack Schultz recovered a Clay Jeffries fumble and Weese drove his team to pay dirt yet again. Weese completed six passes and then took it in himself from the two-yard line to make it 38-31.

Incredibly, The Hawaiians were now just seven points down with almost two minutes still remaining. Butch Gentry pushed an on-side kick off the tee and The Hawaiians recovered, only to find out that the ball had been touched by another Hawaiian player before it had traveled the required 10 yards.

Gentry tried it again. The Hawaiians recovered again. But once again The Hawaiians had touched the ball too soon, and Southern California took over.

Sun quarterback Tony Adams fumbled a few play later, however, and defensive back Dave Atkinson recovered for The Hawaiians. But Weese was hit hard when he tried to pass and the toss was intercepted.

The Hawaiians weren't dead yet, however. Two plays later, Adams fumbled again, and The Hawaiians recovered. But Dummit, in for Weese again, was unable to get a rally started.

"Just ran out of time," lamented Giddings.

Four days after losing to the Sun, on July 21st, The Hawaiians played their home opener against the Detroit Wheels. The attendance figure was a major disappointment, as only 10,080 fans bothered to show up. Although the team was 0-and-2, they had expected a bigger crowd than 10,000 people. Some of those in attendance, like Commissioner Gary Davidson, blamed the poor crowd on the weather, and in fact, it did rain all morning the day of the game and it showered on

and off during the game. It also didn't help matters that the contest was televised in the islands.

Despite the lack of fan support, The Hawaiians won their first game, erasing a 16-14 deficit and rallying to defeat the winless Wheels, 36-16.

"That was a big lift for this club," Giddings said hoarsely in the locker room, "I think I'm kinda speechless. The team gave me the game ball. I can't remember being any happier."

Weese hit on 12 of 23 passes for 223 yards and two touchdowns, to Tim Boyer, who later pulled a hamstring, and Jerry Powell, and also rushed for another score. John Moseley, a 5'7" 165-pound rookie from Missouri electrified the crowd with a weaving and winding 66-yard punt return for another touchdown.

"I saw I couldn't outrun that one guy and I was heading out of bounds, so I had to stop and cut across the other way," Moseley said later, "It's hard for blockers to block people when a guy is cutting all over the place, but my blockers were great. They never gave up. It was a great way to celebrate a birthday."

Dennis Dummit completed the scoring with an 8-yard touchdown pass to Powell.

"Winning is sweet indeed especially after the two tough ones we lost," noted assistant coach Billy Wilson.

Linebacker Jewell McCullar, starting his first game, led The Hawaiians with eight tackles and also intercepted two passes.

After the game, Billy Donckers was cut, but quickly picked up by the Cardinals to play for his old college coach, Don Coryell.

The lack of fans was concerning to the franchise. The fact that the team had some of the league's highest ticket prices, ranging from $8 to $9.50, may have been a factor in keeping fans away. So after the game the team quickly put 5,000 tickets on sale for $5 apiece. Team officials were hoping for a crowd of around 15,000 for their game against Chicago, but as of Friday, only about 12,000 tickets had been sold.

Sure enough, on Sunday, the crowd at the Termite Palace numbered just 12,608 people. Worse yet, The Hawaiians were crushed by Chicago, 53-29.

Fire rookie Mark Kellar scored five touchdowns and added an action point. A disgruntled fan was heard to say to no one in particular, "Even Fresno State held Kellar to four touchdowns."

The Hawaiians scored with 29 seconds left in the first half on a 13-yard pass from Weese to Dave Buchanan. Unfortunately, Chicago had already scored 30 points. "Every time I looked up, Chicago had the ball on our side of the 50-yard line," said Giddings, "It's tough to play defense on a short field. We knew they could run the ball but we thought we could contain them a lot better than we did."

"It wasn't so much the defenses we used," added assistant coach Matt Hazeltine, "but mistakes, mistakes. Someone would make an error on each play. Then everyone would get uptight."

Chicago lengthened their lead to 45-7 before The Hawaiians finally put up some resistance. Weese hit Kelsey for a score, and then special teams captain Greg Slough blocked a punt that Grady Richardson returned for a touchdown. But it was too little too late.

"We were flat," said a somber Giddings, "A team has to expect to have a couple of those games a year, but we sure picked a lousy time to have it."

Tight end John Kelsey gave everyone a scare when he collapsed to the floor while talking to trainer Lincoln Kimura after the game. Fortunately, Kelsey passed out from exhaustion, and not some kind of head injury. "John hasn't been able to work out for more than two weeks," said Billy Wilson of Kelsey, who had been nursing bruised ribs, "but he stayed in there the full game. We threw 52 passes, which meant he was doing a lot of running."

Dennis Dummit suffered a groin injury during the second quarter and The Hawaiians were uncertain whether he could be ready for the next game. The team said that if he wasn't, assistant coach Jim Fassel would be activated. Defensive back Robin Sinclair—sprained thumb—and wide receiver Tim Boyer—dislocated left shoulder—were also banged up against Chicago.

The Hawaiians, with a record of 1-and-3, traveled to Jacksonville to open a three-game road trip. Before 43,896 people in the Gator Bowl, the team lost another close one, 21-14 to the Sharks, who scored the winning touchdown with 20 seconds left in the game.

"Right now I'm awfully disappointed," said Giddings, "We worked awfully hard for this one. I felt like we deserved to win and they just snatched it away from us. This one hurts me worse than the other losses."

The Hawaiians led 14-6 in the fourth quarter when Jacksonville got what turned out to be the break of the game. The Sharks' Grant Guthrie attempted a 37-yard field goal but missed. The Hawaiians, however, were called for being offside. The penalty gave Jacksonville a fourth-and-one, so they decided to go for it. The Sharks made the first down, and several plays later they tied it on a touchdown run by Ricky Lake and a successful action point.

"They called that offsides on our left side, but the right side was the only one that rushed," said Giddings, "I asked one official about it and he said the other guy

called it. I then asked the other guy and he said the other guy called it. They never told me who it was on."

With less than three minutes left, Jacksonville drove 80 yards to win the game, and The Hawaiians had lost another heartbreaker.

On top of losing the game, The Hawaiians also lost three players to knee injuries—wide receiver Jerry Powell, defensive back Jack Schultz and defensive lineman Richard Watkins. All three were listed as doubtful for the Birmingham game.

Prior to the game in Birmingham, Giddings told reporters, "If Birmingham dictates the tempo right from the start, we'll be hurting."

Birmingham wound up dictating the tempo, the clock, and the scoreboard, and by the end of the game The Hawaiians certainly were hurting as the Americans coasted to an easy 39-0 victory.

Giddings was so upset that he declined to make himself available for comments after the game, instead throwing assistants Pete Riehlman and Matt Hazeltine under the bus.

"We're all completely sick about what happened," said Riehlman, "We've been beating ourselves with all our mistakes."

"I wouldn't be surprised if we made some personnel changes soon," added Hazeltine.

Two days after getting crushed by Birmingham, and just as Hazeltine had predicted, The Hawaiians sent tight end Chris Vella and defensive back Robin Sinclair to Portland for running back Clem Turner, who was added to bolster the team's paltry running attack, which was the worst in the league with only 476 yards in six games. It was hoped that Turner, who had been Portland's third-leading rusher and had a 5.0 yards-per-carry average, could improve those numbers.

You wouldn't think things could get any worse after a 39-0 loss, would you? But for The Hawaiians, they did. The team flew to Memphis for the third leg of their three-game road trip, and wound up trailing the Southmen 39-0—at halftime! Memphis went on to win, 60-8, setting a WFL record for most points in one game.

The Hawaiians defense was burned for 6 touchdowns (the Southmen also returned two interceptions for touchdowns) and 553 yards in total offense. The offense did its share in the debacle, getting a punt blocked, turning the ball over six times and having their quarterbacks get sacked eight times.

"There's just not much to say after losing a game this badly," said Giddings, "We just had too many breakdowns on defense. It was an uphill battle too soon and when you have a young team it's twice as hard to make it up. When a team gets going it tends to snowball."

Giddings had shuffled his lineup after the Birmingham slaughter, using a lot of new faces including Turner, running back Steve Conley and wide receiver George Smith against Memphis. Turner got off to a less than promising start in his first game with The Hawaiians. He caught one pass for 12 yards and rushed 5 times for a minus 16 yards.

The day ended on a positive note when The Hawaiians were able to pick up both quarterback Edd Hargett and running back Vin Clements, who had signed "future contracts" with the team for 1975 but had been waived out of the NFL. Hargett had been traded to the Lions but failed their physical so was returned to the Oilers, who then put him on waivers. Clements was waived by the Giants, and both players cleared the league, meaning they were free to sign with The Hawaiians, who at 1-and-6 certainly needed some help.

The Hawaiians returned home after their god-awful three-game road trip to face the Jacksonville Sharks. There was another small crowd of just 10,099 on hand on a beautiful sunny afternoon.

Ron East and his "Beasts" lived up to their nickname against the Sharks, as The Hawaiians' defense registered seven quarterback sacks, two each by East, Levi Stanley, and Lem Burnham.

But The Hawaiians' defensive backs were beaten badly all day. Jacksonville scored on its first series of the game on a 46-yard touchdown pass to Edgar Scott, who easily got behind Dave Atkinson and Hal Stringert. Then, with 2:14 left in the game, defensive back Derrick Williams was beaten by veteran receiver Drew Buie for the winning touchdown to send The Hawaiians to another close defeat, this time 14-8.

"I thought the quarterback was going to be sacked," said Williams later, "and then I saw the receiver cut back outside." The loss gave the team a record of 1-and-7, and Giddings hinted at more changes, especially in the defensive backfield.

"It was a crime the way our defensive secondary played," said Giddings, "For breakdowns to occur on third-and-20 situations is inexcusable. All I can promise is that steps will be taken."

Edd Hargett looked rusty in his debut, hitting on just 9 of 33 passes for 90 yards, but in all fairness he had just three days to prepare with the team and was missing his top three receivers due to injury. He threw a 27-yard touchdown pass to John Kelsey, but also had five picks.

"I played horrible," Hargett said, "I should never throw five interceptions in a whole year let alone one game. We should have been so far in front. You can't bitch about people being hurt. Every team has injuries. You have got to play with those things. We were running the ball well, we just weren't scoring."

The Hawaiians did have their best rushing game of the year, as rookie Ernie O'Leary from Nevada-Reno rushed for 80 yards and newcomer Albert Davis added 65. Turner chipped in with 34 more.

After another disappointing crowd for the Jacksonville game, and with the worst attendance figures in the Wiffle, The Hawaiians, who had fought so stubbornly for Sunday games, finally gave up the ghost and announced that beginning with the season's 12th week, the team would get with the program and start playing their games in the middle of the week like the rest of the league.

Their next home game against Houston drew just 10,248 people, but those few in attendance saw The Hawaiians clobber the Texans, 33-15, thanks for the most part to running back Ernie O'Leary.

"I told you the Irish luck would rub off on us this game," said O'Leary, holding the game ball after rushing for 107 yards, a touchdown and an action point.

O'Leary had finally worked his way into the starting lineup after being cut by the team in training camp and hanging around working as the assistant equipment manager until his time came. And it finally did against the Texans, as The Hawaiians won their first game since July 21st.

"We finally got some breaks," said defensive tackle Ron East, "but I think we had a big hand in making them."

"We're putting it together now," said wide receiver Tim Delaney, who caught 3 passes for 35 yards despite playing with a cast on his right hand.

"It's been a long time," said Giddings, "We're on the right track. A team doesn't get good overnight, but we've seen a drastic improvement the past couple weeks." Giddings crossed up the Texans at times by using Hargett at quarterback and moving quarterback Norris Weese to wide receiver.

NFL veteran linebacker Adrian Young flew into Honolulu the night before the game and was ready to join the team after being waived out of the NFL. With the addition of Young, and the strong play of rookie John Ketchoyian, who had nine tackles against the Texans, The Hawaiians cut Jewell McCullar.

But just when it looked like The Hawaiians might be putting things together, the pieces fell apart a bit as they lost to Portland, 15-8 and also lost their leading rusher, O'Leary, for the season to a broken ankle. The loss was also frustrating in that the game ended with The Hawaiians on the Portland one-yard line—and out of time outs.

"I take full blame for this defeat," said Giddings.

Norris Weese had The Hawaiians on the move late in the game, hitting O'Leary and Clem Turner with short passes and then scrambling himself to the Storm 36-yard line. With the clock ticking away, Weese then hit Delaney at the 10. Delaney managed to get to the one-yard line where Phil Borjas and Robin Sinclair brought him down with just six seconds left. The Hawaiians tried but could not get another play off.

"I thought we could get off another play," said Giddings, "I was sending in our fullback to run it, but Portland was making no effort to get back on defense. I thought we had the TD. One more step and we would have won it."

That one step was enough to put The Hawaiians in the basement behind the resurgent Storm.

"I asked our team not to dwell on the past," said Giddings, "I told them this is a new season."

While the team had been struggling on the field, it also wasn't immune to the controversy and negative publicity that hounded the rest of the Wiffle in 1974. After the Portland game, word leaked out that The Hawaiians might have dealt somewhat less than fairly with a couple of their players.

Steve Conley had played linebacker for the St. Louis Cardinals in 1972 and '73. His NFL salary was around $17,000, so he quickly jumped to Birmingham when they offered him a nice raise up to $35,000-a-year. On August 16th, however, the Americans traded Conley and defensive tackle Gary Crane to The Hawaiians for future considerations. That's allegedly when the trouble started.

"I played seven games for Hawaii without collecting a paycheck," said Conley, "At Hawaii they were paying the veterans, but stringing the rookies along. The kids didn't know any better.

"They were claiming to pay everyone on a 52-week basis, not on a per-game basis as they do in the NFL," Conley continued, "Also, they told us their payroll was set up to make only one payment a month."

Conley, therefore, had to try to live in Hawaii for a month without getting paid. When teammate and player rep Ron East complained to WFL headquarters, he got nowhere.

When Conley finally got a paycheck, it was for $500, and the club claimed it was for two weeks. At that rate, Conley would have stood to earn a little over $11,000

for the year, and not the $35,000 his contract called for.

"Most of the players who jumped to the WFL without real big contracts just want to get back to the NFL," Conley said, "At least in the NFL you get paid."

The situation was supposedly no better for Crane. The defensive tackle finally refused to play after he hadn't been paid in several weeks. On September 4th, the team flew to Portland. After getting off the plane, Crane was cut. Supposedly, the release had been planned in advance.

"They didn't give him any money to go home or anything," said Conley, "and his clothes and belongings were in Honolulu, not with him in Portland. I finally mailed his stuff home to him."

The team finally gave him $1,500 and said they would mail him the rest, but when they did send him another check it had nothing but zeroes on it—with a statement saying that the rest had been taken out for taxes.

Both Crane and Conley said they planned to sue The Hawaiians.

"It's a pack of lies," countered the team's Player Personnel Director, George Najarian, "We paid Conley every cent we owed him. At no time did his contract call for $35,000 like it said in that story. The moment he arrived, he received a large bonus.

"In fact," Najarian continued, "he actually owes us money presently. He illegally took more money from the team than he had coming to him." How Conley took "more money" from the team "illegally" was never specified.

As far as Crane, Najarian said, "Crane received every penny on schedule. There was no previous intent to cut him. He left amiably and got money for moving expenses and per diem."

Ron East denied ever making a complaint to the league office regarding the players. "This team is one of the top three financially-structured organizations in the league," said East, "There are some pretty wealthy backers here, and for me, coming from the NFL, I 'm elated over the way I've been treated.

"There's no doubt in my mind that we'll be paid off by January 31st of next year," East concluded.

John Wilbur shared East's feelings about the team. "In many ways this team reminds me a lot of the Redskins," said Wilbur, "the way democratic decisions are made and stuff like that. And the players get paid on time. This is a fine team. I can't prove it, but I honestly feel that all these rumors and innuendoes are part of an NFL campaign."

Quarterback Randy Johnson also said he felt that the abundance of nasty rumors and negative stories were NFL-oriented.

"I definitely think it's an NFL conspiracy," said Johnson, "There is actually much less deception on this team than there was on the Giants. This team has not lied to us on financial matters. Everybody is paid on time.

"I'm really tired of people knocking the WFL," Johnson continued, "It's a real tragedy that the NFL monopoly is mostly responsible for this. It's irritating because the WFL provides for damn good football."

Was this all part of an NFL conspiracy to discredit the WFL? Certainly, the NFL, in dealing with a rival league, was not going to let any negative story fall through the cracks without trying to push it into the forefront. They had done it with the AAFC and the AFL, and they would do it with the USFL. Had they fabricated stories to make the WFL look bad? Possibly. Again, you were dealing with rival factions here. As the old saying goes, "All is fair in love and war," and this was definitely war. The NBA and ABA and the NHL and WHA were constantly sniping and taking pot shots at each other in the papers and on TV. So the press, especially the press in NFL cities, took any negative story on the WFL and ran with it.

But make no mistake about it; the WFL was doing a good enough job on its own to discredit itself and to make itself look bad. It didn't need a whole lot of help in that area.

Five days after the loss to Portland, the team was back in third place, when they beat Houston 24-17 in the Astrodome. Hargett completed 13 of 18 passes for 167 yards and two touchdowns. His second touchdown toss, a wobbly but accurate throw to John Isenbarger, made the score 24-10 and basically put the game out of reach with 2:56 left.

"That last drive was a typical Hargett drive," said Giddings, "He's not the most graceful quarterback or the best thrower I've ever seen, but he's better at reading defenses than Weese is right now."

Hargett had to enjoy coming back and winning in the city that had cast him off just weeks before. "Sid (Gillman, the Oilers' head coach and GM) told me I'd get a chance when I went to the Oilers in the trade," Hargett said after the game, "But that's just the way Sid is. He's a cold person and he doesn't care about anybody. But he's told the players that and at least he's not lying to them."

The win gave The Hawaiians a record of 3-and-8, half-a-game behind second place Houston and half-a-game ahead of the last place Storm.

R.A. Coppedge, the team's bespectacled kicker who had missed a couple field goal tries against Houston, kicked the game-winning field goal without the use of his glasses, which had broken in the locker room, to give The Hawaiians a 17-14 win over the New York Stars. Coppedge, who had been picked up a couple weeks before after being cut by the Atlanta Falcons, squinted at the game ball he was awarded and said, "I didn't even know the ball made it over the crossbar. I couldn't see a thing without my glasses. I knew it was good when I heard the crowd cheer."

"I couldn't tell from my angle whether he made it, but I said a quick prayer and looked at the ref," said Giddings.

With O'Leary still on the mend, The Hawaiians used Albert Davis against New York. The Stars had cut Davis in training camp, and the former Eagle made them pay, rushing for 125 yards and setting up both the tying touchdown and the winning field goal.

Davis said he had no particular reason to beat the Stars. "I just want to beat everybody," he said. Asked if The Hawaiians had put in any special formations or plays for their improved running game, Davis replied, "We just started hitting people, that's all."

Six-year NFL veteran linebacker Jim Sniadecki, who played his first game for The Hawaiians, said, "I got hit out there tonight several times as hard as I was ever hit in the NFL. You could take either of these teams and beat some of the NFL clubs."

"We had a few adjustments at halftime and I think we did some of our hardest hitting of the season in the last two quarters," said Ron East.

"The young guys we have are super," said linebacker coach Matt Hazeltine, "they are gaining a lot of confidence and it's great to have a combination of youth and experience."

The game drew only 12,169 fans. It was the first Wednesday night home game for the team after they agreed to switch their games from Sundays to Wednesdays. If this game was any indication, the midweek games were not going to draw any more fans than the weekend ones had.

So why were The Hawaiians not drawing fans? The only competition they had on the islands for the sports dollar were the University of Hawaii football team and the Hawaii Islanders Pacific Coast League baseball team. Diane Plotts, who had replaced Danny Rogers as the team's GM, told reporters, "Hawaii so far hasn't taken to The Hawaiians. We are now holding night practices and charging only $1.00 admittance. Things may get better. Still, the local Kama'aina (the Hawaiian word for a long time resident of the islands) don't feel this is their team. They still root for the University of Hawaii. They don't have the aloha feeling for us, yet."

One would think that the way they avoided Honolulu Stadium, the fans definitely had an "aloha" feeling for the team. "Aloha" as in goodbye.

"This is a beach town," Plotts continued, "Also, we practiced at Riverside, California, which didn't give our fans an advance feeling for the team.

"We need more than a 9,000 average," Plotts went on, "Maybe these new players can do the job."

These new players that Plotts was referring to were a passel of NFL veterans who had been cut loose from their teams and then joined The Hawaiians, as the team continued to make moves to shake up the struggling ballclub. Veteran NFL quarterback Randy Johnson, signed to a future contract for 1975, was released by the Giants, cleared waivers and joined the team. Giddings had already picked up running backs John Isenbarger and Vin Clements, and linebacker John Douglas, and had added defensive backs Willie Williams, Otto Brown and Chuck Detwiler, and linebacker Dave Olerich.

While all the players helped spark a resurgence in The Hawaiians fortunes, it was Randy Johnson who made the biggest difference in the team. Before him The Hawaiians had relied on the rookies Weese, Dummit and Donckers and NFL veteran Hargett. None of them had provided much of a spark to ignite The Hawaiians' offense. Johnson came in and took over the starting position, and wound up completing 54% of his passes and leading the team to 5 wins in their last seven contests.

A week after beating New York, The Hawaiians hosted Philadelphia before their largest crowd of the season, 14,497 fans. The Hawaiians' faithful were disappointed, however, as the home team threw four interceptions, two of them when they were inside the Bell 10-yard line, and lost, 21-16, to snap their two-game winning streak.

"We did all the things losers do," said Giddings, "Those short goal line passes were in our game plan. We knew we were going to use them. And besides, you can't always blame the interception on the passer."

Johnson, one of the three passers used by Giddings in the game, threw two of the picks and said later, "Things felt a little unfamiliar to me, but my timing wasn't off. I would like to get to the point where I can play the whole game and call my own plays." Giddings was calling the plays from the sidelines.

One of those was a fake field goal try when Coppedge was sent in to attempt a 51-yarder. Norris Weese, the

holder, jumped up and tried to throw a pass instead, but it fell incomplete.

Another first quarter opportunity was missed. Levi Stanley recovered a fumble on the Bell 48, but Vin Clements was stacked up on a fourth-and-one play to kill that chance.

Johnson replaced starter Edd Hargett in the second quarter. He hit on 4 of 8 passes and had two picked off, one by Don Vallery on a third-and-goal from the Bell 10.

When another Johnson toss was hijacked by Ron Mabra that set up a Bell touchdown to make it 21-8, Giddings went to the bullpen again and summoned Weese. He managed to close it to 21-16 with 1:45 left on a six-yard touchdown pass to John Kelsey and a keeper on the action point. But Philadelphia ran off all but 10 seconds of the clock, and when The Hawaiians finally got it back, Weese's bomb to Derrick Williams was intercepted.

Some wondered why Weese, who had sparked the offense to life, hadn't played earlier. "I hate to second-guess myself," said Giddings, "Norris is our two-minute quarterback and he did a good job when he was in there."

After playing musical quarterbacks against the Bell, Giddings went with Johnson against Birmingham, who got his first start for The Hawaiians. Before 12,039 folks in Honolulu Stadium, Johnson led two long touchdown drives to spark a 14-8 upset. "I think Tug McGraw said it a lot better than I could: You gotta believe," said Johnson, referring to the battle cry of the Mets' relief ace during his team's drive to the 1973 World Series.

After a dreadful 2-and-8 start in their first 10 games, The Hawaiians had turned their season around and, crazy as it may sound, were in the hunt for a playoff spot. The Wiffle had recently announced that the team with the best second-half record would earn a playoff berth, and with the upset of the Americans, The Hawaiians were now 3-and-1 in the second half of the season.

"You have to stop wishing for things to happen and make them happen. I think we've turned the corner," said Johnson, who commandeered a 95-yard march in the first quarter, which he capped with a 10-yard touchdown pass to Tim Boyer. In the third quarter, an interception by Jim Sniadecki set up another Hawaiians scoring drive that ended with a one-yard scoring run by Al Davis.

The Hawaiians tempted fate by going for a fake field goal with two minutes left in the game. The play didn't work, and that gave Birmingham one last chance. But the new and improved Hawaiians defense held the fort. "East's Beasts" poured in on George Mira and sacked him on third down, and then Phil Andre picked off a Mira pass to finish it.

The defense allowed just 74 yards passing, intercepted three passes, blocked a field goal attempt and scuttled a fake field goal try by the Americans.

"The defense did it," said Giddings afterward, "They're tremendous. This is the best they've played all year."

A week later, the team flew to the City of Brotherly Love to face the Bell for the second time in three weeks. It was a close ball game, and although the contest was tied 8-8 at the half, Mike Giddings yanked his starting quarterback, Johnson, in favor of Norris Weese.

"I was a little bit surprised when he told me I was starting the second half," said Weese, who completed 11 of 19 passes for 128 yards and a touchdown and earned the game ball. "I was not real sure where I stood. This was real gratifying for me. You can look at statistics all you want, but when you bring a team back to win, that's the important thing."

Despite the performance by Weese, Giddings stressed that Johnson was still his starter. "He's (Weese) our come-off-the-bench guy," said the head coach, "He's the Mike Marshall [*Los Angeles Dodgers ace relief pitcher*] of our team. He gives you that lift. I felt it was the right time to get our lift, so I put in Norris at the start of the second half."

Willie Williams picked off three passes, and Al Davis scored three touchdowns as The Hawaiians finally upended the Bell, 25-22. Davis scored his third touchdown with just 2:45 left when he caught a lob pass from Weese, broke two tackles and scored to erase a 22-18 deficit. Weese set up the winning score by connecting with Vin Clements for 26 yards and scrambling for 12 more.

"It's a lucky win, but we'll take it," said Giddings, who then added, "I'm glad we don't play these guys again. They are the only team to get 20 points off of us in the last eight weeks."

In Portland for a game in Week Sixteen, The Hawaiians didn't help themselves in their quest for a playoff spot by losing a heartbreaker to the Storm by the score of 3-0.

R.A. Coppedge, who had been sick most of the week with the flu, misfired on four field goals. A 27-yarder was blocked, a 50-yarder and a 42-yard try were both short, and then a 47-yard effort with a minute remaining was just a tad to the left.

But Coppedge and his teammates thought there was no "tad" to it, and that the kick had been good.

They celebrated until the referee signaled the kick was no good.

"I don't know about that one," said Mike Giddings, "Some of the guys on the team thought that he made it. I know it was high enough and long enough."

The loss gave The Hawaiians a 6-and-10 record, half-a-game better than Portland and Shreveport. Chicago, 7-and-9, and Philadelphia, 6-and-10, were also in the hunt for the three wild card playoff spots.

"We can't let this loss affect us mentally," Giddings continued, "We didn't lose any ground (as both Chicago and Philadelphia lost). The only thing that happened is that Portland gained on everybody."

Portland moved the ball well; but came up empty once they hit the red zone.

The team traveled to Chicago a week later, facing a team that had beaten them 53-29 earlier in the season and had called some plays near the end that made it look like the Fire had tried to run up the score. Giddings and the team remembered. As Randy Johnson, playing just three quarters, hit on 22 of 39 passes for 304 yards and four touchdowns, The Hawaiians tied the league record for points in a game with a 60-17 destruction of the Fire.

"It's probably about as relaxed a feeling as I've ever had," said Giddings, "Here it is the 17th game of the season and this was the first one where we had things over early."

But it didn't start out so easy. Chicago actually led, 10-8 after the first quarter. The Hawaiians then scored on their next six possessions, however, exploding for 30 points in the second quarter and adding 22 more in the second half. The Hawaiians forced six turnovers and had 509 yards in total offense.

"I'll tell you this," Giddings said, "nothing is better than ending an 18-day road trip with a 60-17 win. . . . Our team looked like a precision unit against Chicago, which is incredible, considering the road trip."

Giddings said he didn't feel bad about going for an on-sides kick with a 45-10 lead. "I still remember they threw the ball on us in the waning moments of our first game when they were leading, 53-29," said Giddings, "I wouldn't say revenge was the most important factor in the game, but it was one of the points I brought up in my pre-game talk to the team."

Revenge may have been a factor a week later when The Hawaiians hosted Memphis. Drawn by the lure of free tickets offered by a local radio station and a 10-cent Primo Beer Night promotion, the Kama'aina came out 20,544 strong—the largest crowd of the season—to watch Memphis edge The Hawaiians 33-31 in a wild, erratic and thrilling game.

If there was any consolation in the loss, it was the fact the team was 50 points better than when Memphis annihilated The Hawaiians, 60-8 back in August.

"We lost to the best team in the league by two points, that's a hell of a lot better than last time," said Giddings.

Randy Johnson hit on 22 of 44 passes, 10 of them to Tim Delaney for 161 yards. The two connected for three touchdowns. But John Huarte, despite three picks, matched Johnson touchdown for touchdown and the Southmen were just too much for The Hawaiians.

"It was one of those games," said Hawaiians' defensive back Chuck Detwiler, "they were in the right corners at the right times."

The loss to Memphis gave The Hawaiians a record 7-and-11. They now trailed Philadelphia, at 8-and-10, and Portland, at 7-10-1, in the playoff hunt. Chicago, with another loss, dropped to 7-and-11, while Shreveport also lost to fall to 6-11-1.

After a season's worth of inconsistent and at times awful performances, The Hawaiians finally put it all together when they whipped Southern California, 29-8, before 13,870 happy fans in the Termite Palace.

Randy Johnson sparked the offense again with a 17 of 30 for 259 yards performance. He threw a pair of touchdown passes to John Isenbarger. Tim Delaney, who the Sun found it almost impossible to cover, grabbed nine aerials for 128 yards.

The defense was also strong, harassing Sun quarterback Tony Adams into a 5 of 16 passing night before he was lifted. Dan McGuire wrote in the *Honolulu Advertiser* that The Hawaiians' defensive line "was shoving the Sun almost all the way back to Anaheim." The Hawaiians also intercepted two passes, recorded four sacks and blocked a field goal.

The win pushed The Hawaiians record to 8-and-11, tied with Philadelphia who lost to Birmingham, 26-23. Chicago lost to drop to 7-and-12, while Shreveport won to climb to 7-11-1. Portland lost in Orlando to see their record fall to 7-11-1.

The Hawaiians hosted Portland on the final week of the season with a playoff spot still on the line. Florida, Charlotte, Memphis, Birmingham and Southern California had all clinched berths in the playoffs. The Hawaiians, Portland, Philadelphia, Shreveport, and Chicago were all mathematically alive in the hunt for the remaining playoff spots in what was then an 8-team field.

"Both teams came in thinking it was a 'must win' situation," said Giddings.

On a bone-chilling night which saw torrential rains pound the old Termite Palace and turn the field into

a quagmire, the Storm twice stopped The Hawaiians on the two-yard line during a scoreless first half. The Hawaiians pushed Portland all over the field but again, much like their 3-0 loss to the Storm on October 16th, came up empty in the red zone. The Hawaiians had 160 yards at halftime, and Johnson was already 9 of 16 for 108 yards. But a fumble, a failure on fourth down, and an interception by ex-Hawaiian Robin Sinclair kept the game scoreless.

After halftime, however, The Hawaiians finally got their act together. "The offensive team got together at half time and said 'We've outplayed these guys six quarters and now to hell with it—let's get some points,'" said Randy Johnson. Sure enough, on their first possession of the third quarter, they drove 80 yards in seven plays, the last one a 12-yard strike from Johnson to a slipping and sliding John Isenbarger for the touchdown that broke the ice. Johnson then added the action point himself.

The Hawaiians began to establish some ball control, and in the fourth quarter added another touchdown on a 24-yard run through the mud by Clayton Heath.

The Hawaiians got the ball back with a minute left at the Portland 38. With Norris Weese at the controls, The Hawaiians drove downfield and with 10 seconds left, Weese whipped a 20-yard scoring pass to Grady Richardson to make it 23-0.

As The Hawaiians lined up for the action point, the demoralized Storm players, who had experienced deep financial hardships despite their own resurgence in the second half of the season, walked off the field.

"I was very surprised," said Portland coach Dick Coury, "I didn't think my friend (Giddings) would do that to me."

The Hawaiians popped the champagne in the locker room, celebrating a comeback from a 2-and-8 record and being in last place to 9-and-11 and a playoff spot. The happiest player in the locker room was probably wide receiver Tim Delaney, who grabbed six passes despite the slop to give him a league-high 89 catches for the season.

"I don't think anything of it," said Delaney on being cut by both the Giants and Cardinals, "That's up to them to think about it. I'm not after any vengeance. Now all I want to do is get to the World Bowl."

Despite a frustratingly god-awful first half of the season, The Hawaiians had made the playoffs. They were scheduled to face Western Division champion Southern California in the first round in what was termed a "lower bracket" game. But several days later, the playoff format was revamped to include just six teams instead of eight. The Hawaiians held their breath momentarily but wound up still making the postseason tournament, and would still face the Sun in the first round.

"I think The Hawaiians could go all the way," predicted Portland coach Dick Coury. But after a 32-14 win over Southern California in the first round, The Hawaiians fell 22-19 to Birmingham in the semi-finals.

Despite the team's financial hardships, Hemmeter promised to keep the franchise in Honolulu in 1975—provided there was a WFL in 1975.

"If the WFL is healthy next year, we'll definitely stay here," Hemmeter said, "But if there is no league, or the whole thing is totally 'Mickey Mouse,' we might try to sell and then hope for an invitation from the National Football League."

Because of low attendance, high travel costs, and bonuses paid out for future contracts, the team's financial losses were indeed mind-blowing: The Hawaiians had lost $3.2 million. "If next year is anything like this," Hemmeter said, "I would rather not be a part of the WFL."

Hemmeter went on to say that he was not concerned about whether or not there would be a Hawaiians franchise in 1975. He said his concern was with the WFL itself. Hemmeter then backed up his statement when he was asked to take over as league commissioner from the deposed Davidson. He promptly resigned from The Hawaiians ownership group and took over as head honcho of the WFL.

"I pledge honesty and credibility," Hemmeter said on taking the job.

The Hawaiians and the WFL sure could have used a lot of both.

CHAPTER 9

Houston, We Have a Problem . . .

The Houston Texans, 1974

"Gee, did I do anything wrong?"

—Defensive Tackle JOHN MATUSZAK, on his signing with the Texans while still under contract to the Oilers

When Gary Davidson approached him about the WFL, Steve Arnold jumped at the chance to join in the fun and asked about purchasing the rights to a franchise for Tokyo, Japan (How the Japanese would have reacted to the boondoggle that the WFL would become is anyone's guess). When told that the World Football League would need more time to actually move out into the world, Arnold set his sights a bit more locally and settled on Memphis, Tennessee. Arnold's sights would soon get lower indeed. Memphis became Houston which then became Shreveport, which was about as far away from Tokyo as you could get. The franchise was just another WFL team that nobody, especially their fans, seemed to want.

Arnold thought Memphis was a plum ripe for plucking. It was untapped territory with only an ABA franchise to boast about (and it was owned by Charlie Finley *and* in the middle of a season where it won 21 games and lost 63, so it's doubtful the locals boasted very loudly about having it).

Memphis, however, did not exactly welcome Steve Arnold with open arms (or open wallets). The player agent and special advisor for the WHA found the city caught up in NFL fever. Memphis, it seemed, was on the short list for NFL expansion for 1976, and the city yearned for an NFL franchise. For years they had hosted an annual exhibition game and had wined and dined the NFL in hopes of getting their very own team. Then along came Arnold and his plans to put a WFL team in Memphis.

Arnold made a pitch to Mayor Wyeth Chandler, the City Park Commission, grain millionaire E.W. Cook and anyone else who would listen in an effort to bring the World Football League to the city. Who knows, Arnold may even have talked to Elvis.

But nobody was listening. Memphians were still listening to the NFL's siren song, hoping to be one of the cities picked to get an expansion team in 1976. The city was dragging its collective feet in stadium lease negotiations with Arnold in the belief that Memphis would be getting an NFL team. The Memphis mayor even publicly stated he would be risking his political career if he didn't keep the WFL out of Memphis.

Arnold soon got the message. He set his sights elsewhere. On February 19th, Arnold announced he was considering moving his franchise to Portland, Oregon. But when that move fell through, he turned his eyes toward Texas. The state was in an oil boom, and Arnold figured there had to be some potential investors hanging around the state's oil fields.

So, Arnold left Tennessee and ventured southwest to Houston. But the welcome he received in Houston was no warmer than the one he had received at Memphis. No one seemed interested in buying into the team. Because his cash flow was beginning to slow to a trickle, Arnold couldn't even come up with a $14,000 deposit to secure a lease to use Rice Stadium.

"As far as the situation in Houston is concerned," said Gary Davidson at the time, "there was sentiment for putting a team there because the Oilers were doing so poorly and Houston is the nation's fifth largest city. I was dead set against it."

So, as it turned out, were any local investors and most of the city's football fans.

Director of Public Relations and Promotions Wayne Chandler said that because of the flirtations

with Memphis and the late move to Texas, the Texans did not have enough time to prepare properly for their maiden season.

"I think it was April 10th when they first came to Houston," said Chandler, "At that time they didn't have a place to play, they didn't have a coach, and they didn't have a single player signed. Most of the other WFL teams had already been pretty well along."

The Texans acquired the negotiating rights to Cowboys' quarterback Craig Morton from Birmingham, and then got to negotiating. What they negotiated with is anybody's guess. The Texans knew that Morton was unhappy about being a backup to Roger Staubach in Dallas, so they used that as a carrot to lure Morton to Houston, and then pried him away from the Cowboys with a significant offer. On April 10th, Morton signed his name to a "future contract" with the Texans to take effect in 1975.

"My role in Dallas next year will be about as unpredictable as it ever has been," said Morton, "They'll get the same kind of performance out of me that has helped them win championships."

When asked about his relationship with Cowboys' coach Tom Landry, Morton said, "In my nine years there, I have been treated fairly. Before I signed with Houston, I notified Coach Landry. He wished me luck and said he understood my situation."

Say What?

Steve Arnold, caught up in the hoopla and excitement of the Texans signing Dallas quarterback Craig Morton, actually said, "The signing of Morton gives us a lot of hope for the future. He's going to be more valuable to the Texans than Gordie Howe was to the Aeros (of the WHA)." Really? Howe became one the best players in the WHA—so good in fact that the league named its MVP award after him—and was one of the top draws in the league. He led Houston to WHA championships in 1974 and 1975, scored over 100 points twice and over 90 points during two other seasons. It's highly unlikely that Morton would have had the same impact on the Texans, the city of Houston or the WFL.

The Texans then approached Chiefs' head coach Hank Stram with a big offer to coach the new WFL team. Stram said he was offered a 10-year deal for $2-million plus part ownership in the team. Stram said thanks but no thanks. A couple days later, the Texans announced they had signed Jim Garrett, a former assistant with the Giants and Cowboys, to be their head coach and general manager.

Because of the late start, Garrett did not have much time to put together a team before training camp was set to begin. He went for experience, and signed a bunch of grizzled veterans to play for the Texans, and the team wound up with 33 players who had either NFL or CFL experience. A lot of them, roughly 25, had roots in Texas, either as collegians or as pros.

"By design we had put together a veteran team," said Steve Arnold.

Oops . . .

Garrett and Arnold were so set on building a team of veterans that they completely missed the boat on a couple rookies. Running back Jimmy Edwards and quarterback Matthew Reed were both cut after one practice session. That's *one practice session*. Both signed with Birmingham and were integral parts of the Americans' championship season.

Besides Edwards and Reed, the team experienced some other hiccups along the way. Garrett signed former Tennessee State star quarterback Eldridge Dickey to a contract and began designing an offense around him to utilize his talents. Dickey, however, never showed up at training camp. Garrett was also hoping to rely on veteran running back Paul Gipson and his speed to complement fullback Jim Nance.

"I think I can still play," said Gipson, who had bounced between the Falcons, Lions and Patriots during his NFL career, "What this all narrows down to is confidence. If you don't believe you can go to the moon, you won't. They said I wouldn't make it in college and that I was too little for the NFL and I proved them wrong. Now I'm fighting again."

Unfortunately, Gipson was hampered by various injuries during the season and wound up rushing for only 406 yards.

Another running back, former 1,000-yard rusher Hoyle Granger, came to camp but then retired. The entire offensive line would also have to be completely reassembled due to a rash of injuries.

The team's roster did not even impress its own players. Linebacker and future NFL referee Chad Brown was not very complimentary when he wrote about his days with the Texans in his book, *Inside the Meat Grinder*. Brown said that when his agent, Milton Grimes, told him he was playing for Houston, he

thought Grimes meant the Oilers. When told it was the Texans, Brown responded, "The World Football League? That's not even a league! It's made up of guys who are either to old, too weak or too lousy to play in the NFL. No way I'm playing there!"

When Grimes told him he was able to negotiate a no-cut contract that with incentives came to over $100,000, Brown, no one's fool, reconsidered.

But Brown quickly regretted his decision. He says in his book that his teammates' photos made them "look either at least fifty or stoned or both." He went on to say that the games themselves resembled "nothing but old-timer's games: warm, well-meaning, soft, and mushy and played in slow motion."

In an effort to drum up interest in his team, Jim Garrett announced that the Texans' practice sessions would be open to the public and that fans would be invited to mingle with the players at the end of each session. He also said he had plans to allow small groups of fans to tour the locker room on the night of each game.

"Our success rests on our ability to relate to the people we need most," said Steve Arnold, "the players and the fans. We feel the National Football League no longer knows how to do this. Their failures let us get our foot in the door."

Arnold added that the team needed to average around 30,000 fans per game to break even, but predicted he'd lose about $500,000 in 1974. His prediction looked like it might come true, as he was already running into problems. Rumors had it that Arnold was attempting to sell off his eighty-percent share of ownership for $1-million. Just before the start of the season, the team's bank account listed a balance of only $7,000. Due to the lack of funds, the team hadn't even been able to move into their offices yet. While Arnold negotiated with potential investors, the league was forced to pick up the tab for the team's expenses.

Money was so tight that when the team took the field in Chicago for the opener, there were no logos on their helmets or names on the back of their jerseys. The Texans were probably glad they remained anonymous as they lost to Chicago, 17-0 despite forcing four turnovers. The offense was pathetic, gaining a total of only 174 yards. It didn't help that starting quarterback Mike Taliaferro was lost to an injury.

"Some of the players we have haven't played for a year or two," Steve Arnold tried to explain after the game, "It's going to take them a few games to get back in the swing of things. We're going to get better as the season rolls along. The schedule favors us. We play five of our last six games at home."

The Texans drew 26,277 fans for their home opener against Philadelphia, just a little over half the capacity of the Astrodome. On top of that, the game was hardly one to entice fans to come back. Neither team played well at all, as they combined for more punts—23—than first downs—20. Ex-Oiler Don Trull, subbing for an injured Taliaferro, managed to complete only 4 of 16 passes for a measly 32 yards. Cornerback Daryl Johnson scored the game's only touchdown by returning an interception of a King Corcoran pass 57 yards for a touchdown. Charlie Durkee added a 28-yard field goal, and the Texans had their first win, 11-0.

"I played with King when we were trying out for the Patriots," said Daryl Johnson, "and I knew how he likes to throw. Really, it wasn't so much as our team defense. They didn't seem to adjust to it sometimes."

"We had seen all their formations on film," added Garrett, "We weren't surprised. I think in the whole league the defenses are ahead of the offenses. The Bell was like us last week against Chicago . . . a lot of penalties hurt them. Their defense played well."

The offense continued to struggle in Orlando, as the Texans fell to the Blazers, 15-3. Houston didn't cross midfield at all in the first half, had only two first downs at halftime, and were hit with 107 yards in penalties. Taliaferro completed 12 of 18 passes but they went for only 100 yards. "Offensively, we're just banged up," said Jim Garrett after the game, "You can't lose players like Paul Gipson, Tom Bailey, Clyde Williams, and Willie Frazier, and have quarterback problems like we've had and expect to score points."

With an almost completely re-assembled offensive line due to injuries, the Texans managed to somehow defeat the Blazers, 7-6, in a return match at the Astrodome. Once again the defense pretty much saved the day, as John Mallory picked off a pass and returned it 59 yards to the one-yard line, setting up a 1-yard plunge by Jim Nance. The 16,286 fans in attendance saw the Texan defense smother the Florida offense, holding them to 75 total yards. The Texans' defensive line of old veterans Don Brumm, Al Dotson, Jim Kanicki and Joe Robb poured in on Blazer quarterback Bob Davis, forcing two interceptions, sacking him twice, and basically bouncing him around the Astroturf like a basketball.

By now, while the defense was earning respect, the Texans' offense, however, had become the butt of several jokes. The local press wrote that the Houston offensive game plan seemed to consist of "lulling the opposition to sleep and getting the defense to score touchdowns." After four games, the Texans had scored

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only 21 points. In the hopes of adding some offensive punch, Garrett picked up running back Warren McVea from cash-strapped Detroit for $15,000. Where the almost as cash-strapped Texans managed to scrape up $15,000 is anyone's guess.

Garrett was very animated when he talked about McVea.

"Warren McVea has raised the morale of this football team to a fever pitch!" Garrett exclaimed, "His first three workouts have been fantastic. He's the kind of back who gets you five yards on a bad play."

The Texans traveled to Portland, where Storm head coach Dick Coury said that "Houston has the best defense in the league." Too bad nobody could say that about their offense, which was ranked dead last in the WFL. Against Portland, they moved the ball well enough to score two touchdowns, and were saved again by the defense which smothered running back Rufus Ferguson on an action point try to preserve a 15-15 overtime tie, the first and only one in the WFL. Taliaferro had an 11 of 22 passing night for just 138 yards and a touchdown. Nance added 83 yards on the ground, but the Texans had yet to display the offensive fireworks promised by the Wiffle founders. Garrett, never at a loss for words, criticized the WFL's overtime rule. "I favor a playoff in postseason," Garrett offered, "but not in regular-season play, because I think fatigue sets in after four quarters."

Back in the Astrodome, a "Nickel Beer Night" crowd of 31,227 people watched the Texans lose again, this time to the Sun, 18-7.

The defense played another solid game, at one point stopping the Sun on 10 straight third-down conversion tries. The defense's performance inspired chants of "Deguello!"—Spanish for "No Quarter"—from the Astrodome crowd. But the offense once again sabotaged the team.

"Fumbles, intercepted passes, and obviously that last error cost us," said Garrett, speaking of a 66-yard interception touchdown return by the Sun late in the game, "We had a very good shot at tying it. It was an extremely poorly thrown ball."

The injury bug continued to bite as well. Taliaferro missed some of the game when he was kicked in the head by Dave Roller and needed six stitches to close the cut. McVea made his debut but after carrying the ball only twice was sent to the sidelines with broken ribs. With his offense still sputtering, Garrett signed wide receiver Don Maynard, who had recently been cut by the Jets. Garrett was hoping for three things: 1), that Maynard could add a deep passing threat to the offense; 2), that he could add a veteran presence to the club; and 3) most importantly of all, that he wouldn't get hurt.

Maynard had no sooner signed with the Texans that he began blasting Jets' management.

"I missed three passes all of last season, had always been a nice guy on and off the field and look what they did to me," Maynard railed, "How much do you think I got from my last year with the Jets?" A reporter guessed $65,000, and Maynard retorted, "Well, you missed by $25,000. I got $40,000 in my last year and they still owe me $4,600 of that. I could have gone into school teaching and got more money than that. Weeb Ewbank was just cheap. I'm getting more than that with Houston."

Garrett was disappointed in his team's performance so far, and began to question the wisdom of signing so many veteran players. "Five years ago we would have had one of the super teams in the WFL," the coach said, "I'm afraid we have players who just don't have enough steam left in the old boiler."

In New York, the defense didn't seem to have much steam in the old boiler as they gave up 43 points, after allowing just 54 in the first five games of the season, in a 43-10 loss to the Stars. The offense turned the ball over three times in the first half and the Stars built a 21-3 lead and never looked back. In the locker room after the game, Garrett railed at his players and promised there'd be a "purge" of those who were not making an effort.

The Texans welcomed the Stars to the Astrodome a week later in another home-and-home series. Houston avenged the loss to New York from the week before by dumping the Stars, 14-11, before a very disappointing crowd of only 10,126 people.

"We embarrassed them last week and teams don't take that lightly," said New York coach Babe Parilli.

Mike Taliaferro completed 11 of 20 passes for 182 yards with two touchdowns and an interception. Fullback Mike Richardson led the Texans in rushing with 83 yards on 18 carries. Rick Eber caught four passes for 81 yards and a TD. But all the stats, and even the score, would be forgotten for one reason—John Matuszak.

"I thought I had seen it all," said Stars' coach Babe Parilli in response to what happened in the Astrodome on August 28th, 1974.

The Tale of the Tooz

Probably the most bizarre episode involving the WFL, and believe me, that is saying a lot, occurred in the Houston Astrodome on August

28th, 1974. The Houston Texans had the oldest and most veteran-laden team in the World Football League, but so far that had not bought them a great deal of success. By the time of their Week 8 matchup against the visiting New York Stars, the Texans were just 2-4-1. Their solid defense had performed well, but their offense was just plain offensive, as the team had yet to score more than 15 points in a game.

During the week before the game, John Matuszak, a 6'8" 285-pound second-year defensive tackle, had played in a preseason game with the NFL's Oilers. He attended practice for two days before suddenly leaving camp and announcing that he had decided to join the Texans. "The Tooz" stated that he and Texans' owner Steve Arnold had found a loophole in his contract with the Oilers which would allow him to sign with and immediately begin playing for the Texans—a point of dispute with the NFL club that would lead to a bizarre situation during the game. There were 10,126 fans in attendance for the Wednesday night contest at the Astrodome. Following a defensive series by Houston in the first quarter, in which Matuszak appeared in five plays, Harris County sheriff's deputies entered the field area looking for Matuszak and handed him a temporary injunction ordering him not to play for the Texans. Matuszak waved the papers at the stunned and silenced crowd and then received a roar of approval as he made his way to the bench and watched the remainder of the game from there. "We wanted to serve it (the restraining order) before Matuszak got on the field," said Oiler owner Bud Adams, "but they left the sheriff's office too late to issue it before the game started." "I didn't have time to read the court order and evaluate it," said Arnold, "but God, it looked real. And I didn't want to go to jail." The order sidelined the Tooz for the rest of the game, and according to his lawyer Gary Koposta, would keep him inactive until a hearing on September 6th. Matuszak's comment on the whole bizarre episode put everything into perspective. "Gee," the Tooz said sheepishly, "did I do anything wrong?" Matuszak was left behind the following week when the team went to Hawaii. The Texans subpoenaed the entire coaching staff and all 103 players on the Oilers roster for the hearing. In the end, a judge ruled there was no such "loophole" in Matuszak's contract, certainly not one big enough for the Tooz to slip through, and Matuszak never played again for either the Texans or the Oilers. Unappreciative of his antics, the NFL club dealt the big defensive end to the Kansas City Chiefs, oddly enough in exchange for WFL future signee and eventual NFL Hall of Famer Curley Culp.

The whole affair did not endear the Texans to Oiler owner Bud Adams.

"We paid little attention to them and tried not to get in their way," said Adams, "but after the Matuszak deal we didn't exactly look too favorably on the Texans. We weren't going out of our way to be friends with them. They played dirty pool."

Four days later, Jim Garrett came to only one conclusion after he watched The Hawaiians score three times in the last quarter and twice in the last 50 seconds to beat the Texans, 33-15 in Honolulu. "They stunk and we stunk," he said succinctly, "They didn't play well enough to beat us. It was garbage football out there. I don't even want to talk about it anymore."

"We played a lousy game," added linebacker John Villipiano.

"Somebody's gotta win and somebody's gotta lose," said Don Maynard philosophically, "You have to hand it to Hawaii. They played a good game."

As it had been all season, the Texans' offense was inconsistent all day. They turned the ball over twice and had to punt 8 times.

Houston's Number One quarterback, Mike Taliaferro, missed the game due to a leg injury. "No question Taliaferro would have made a difference, but I agree with the decision that he shouldn't have played," said Maynard, "It might have jeopardized his season if he had played."

After the game, a disgusted Garrett continued his tirade to the media, saying, "I can only conclude that we can't win in this league with the roster we have now. I have in mind to change the make-up of the team little by little." To prove his point, Garrett released a couple veterans, defensive tackle Al Dotson and safety Art McMahon.

Almost daily, new players were brought into the Texans' camp for workouts. Some of the players were signed, others released. Nothing Garrett tried seemed to work. In Memphis, the Southmen led 16-0 after one quarter and 31-0 at the half on their way to a 45-0 drubbing of the Texans. Houston gave up 422 yards in total offense, and their offense managed only 56 yards on the ground and committed four turnovers. For the second game in a row they had to punt the ball away 8 times.

None of the three quarterbacks—Taliaferro, D.C. Nobles, or David Mays—had been able to generate anything resembling an offense.

Garrett, showing he was not one to mince words, said the loss was due to "a lack of effort from the players. Most of our players are only a shadow of what they once were."

The offense probably wanted to hide in the shadows at the season's halfway mark. In their first ten games, the Texans had scored only 82 points, by far the lowest total in the league. Nance was the team's leading rusher but had gained only 330 yards.

The Texans proceeded to lose their third game in a row, 24-17, to The Hawaiians, before only 9,861 people, the smallest crowd to ever watch a football game in the history of the Astrodome. The last three attendance figures for the Texans had totaled only around 35,000 people. Even the god-awful Oilers, coming off back-to-back 1-and-13 seasons, were able to draw 25,317 fans to their opener.

The game was not as close as the score indicated as the Texans' last score—on a Taliaferro to McVea 19-yard touchdown pass—came late in the game. The loss wasted a solid 131-yard performance from Jim Nance, and dropped the team's record to a dismal 3 wins, 7 losses and a tie. Houston fans used to the pitiful Oilers weren't interested in having another awful football team to root for.

Due to the poor attendance figures, and the expenses of running a football team, Arnold was finding that owning a pro football organization was putting a strain on his checkbook. He finally went to visit his old pal Gary Davidson, telling him that he was experiencing "difficulties" in meeting the franchise's weekly financial obligations. Arnold told Davidson that he had gone through all of his personal finances, and that no one was interested in buying into the club anytime soon. He confided to Davidson that he was in debt to the tune of $200,000 (with some sources claiming the actual figure was twice that much).

Several small businesses in the Houston area were calling the team offices looking for payment on outstanding bills. The team finally had to resort to selling off furniture in the clubhouse and locker room to raise money to pay the players and other unpaid bills.

On the Texans' final day of practice in Houston, a bus driver refused to take the team to Rice University for its workout unless he was first paid the $61 bus-rental fee. Seems the bus company hadn't been paid by the team in weeks. Garrett was forced to cancel practice.

The league office was finally obliged to take over control of the Texans from Arnold and move it, with reports circulating that the franchise's new home would be Shreveport, Louisiana. Steve Arnold's dream of a get-rich-quick scheme, like those of so many of those of his fellow owners, had turned into a get-poor-quick nightmare.

A temporary suspension of Coach Jim Garrett, incurred because Garrett was said to be "stashing" players above the 42-man limit, was made permanent after he reportedly called the team's new city "rinky-dink," and supposedly urged players not to move to Louisiana with the franchise.

Jack Cherry, the Texans' public relations director, said the suspension was "for a number of violations, more than just one, involving rules and bylaws and conduct."

Don Andersen, the league's vice president for public relations, announced that, "The league views this move to Shreveport as a very positive move and we feel we just don't need this type of comment."

Garrett countered by denying any detrimental action and appealed to Davidson, who said he would hold a hearing in New York.

"I think the suspension is wrong," said Warren McVea, "It's an injustice, and I think it will be wrong if the players don't stand behind him to try and get him back. He never said anything negative or anything about us not going to Shreveport. He gave us things we might think about before making the move."

Say What?????

After suspending Jim Garrett as Houston's head coach for "conduct detrimental to the World Football League," Gary Davidson turned around and hired him as his "special consultant."

The league had assumed all debts of the Texans and spokesmen for the Wiffle said that all contracts would be honored, but players seemed to want to make sure before making the move to Shreveport.

"I'm going to Shreveport to see what kind of a deal they have," said McVea, "There's no way I'm going to play and not get paid."

"Before we go," said quarterback David Mays, "we want to make certain the financial things are clear."

The Texans met among themselves and with temporary coach and general manager Henry Lee Parker to discuss back pay.

"Some of the guys on the team have it rough," said McVea, "They have families with kids and now they're going to have to make the move. Also, some of them are in financial trouble. It's bad when you have to worry about feeding your kids."

Some players, including quarterback Mike Taliaferro, declined to move from Houston to Shreveport. Taliaferro opted for retirement instead. Jim Nance refused to live in Shreveport and spent the rest of the season commuting to Louisiana. Three ex-Giants, defensive tackle Rich Glover, running back / wide receiver Rocky Thompson, and wide receiver Rich Houston, who had joined the Texans the week before, hadn't signed their contracts and decided not to play just yet, opting instead for a very prudent wait-and-see attitude.

Parker flew to Shreveport to begin setting up the new franchise, and would remain as General Manager until the club was officially sold to Shreveport owners.

A Houston newspaperman said, "The Texans left town just like they came: broke, disorganized and unwanted." The sardonic syndicated column The Bottom Ten, which rated the worst *college* football teams in the country, had the Texans ranked 16th on their list.

When Garrett told the team that the franchise was bankrupt and that the players would no longer be getting paid, Chad Brown knew he had had enough. "For every camel's back," Brown wrote in *Inside the Meat Grinder*, "there is a straw. For Chad Brown, that straw was the World Football League."

CHAPTER 10

Belly Up

The Jacksonville Sharks, 1974

"It's a shabby way to run a railroad."
—Sharks Quarterback KIM HAMMOND

True to his word, Chuck Rohe found a buyer for the Florida franchise. His name was Fran Monaco, who paid $650,000 to Davidson for the rights to the franchise. Monaco was a businessman from nearby DeLand who owned several laboratories—in DeLand, Ormond Beach and Deltona—which manufactured medical instruments.

He said his CPA and his lawyer had both cautioned him about getting into the WFL. "Look," Monaco said, "my CPA and my lawyer both advised against building the DeLand Laboratory, now I have three.

"George Marshall bought the Redskins for $2,500. George Halas bought the Bears for $500. Bob Hope put $20,000 into the Rams and sold out for two million," Monaco continued.

Monaco, by far the smallest owner in pro football at 5'2" and 152 pounds, named his wife Douglas the team's vice president.

He then named his new franchise the "Sharks," a name that he discovered didn't sit too well with the Florida tourism board. Monaco was asked to change the name to something they claimed would be "less intimidating," and the board went so far as to suggest "Stingrays" and "Suns." Monaco must have wondered what the board meant by "less intimidating" when he saw that other Florida athletic teams sported names like Rattlers, Moccasins, Barracudas, Tigers, Lions, Panthers and Gators. Monaco told the tourism board to take a flying leap off a short Florida pier, and said he'd stay with Sharks, thank you very much.

With his wife as vice president and a nickname that people more or less seemed to like, Monaco had to find a city for his team.

Tampa was on a short list for an NFL expansion club for '76. Miami belonged to the Dolphins. Orlando was the realm of Rommie Loudd, who had lobbied for an NFL team of his own. Monaco was running out of possibilities.

The owner next set his sights on Jacksonville, but the City Council was asking for a ton of money to rent the Gator Bowl, and then took its good old sweet time to lower the rental fees for the benefit of the team. Monaco said, "I have to be concerned because the league wants to have definite stadium locations determined by next week's owners meeting in New York." For most of the spring, the franchise was known simply as "Florida." Monaco added that other cities were still contacting him "but the only affirmative reply I've gotten has been from Jacksonville." So Jacksonville it was.

Say What?

Sharks' owner Fran Monaco seemed to have lost his grip on reality a bit when he announced the signing of Notre Dame defensive back Mike Townsend, a sixth-round draft choice, with these immortal words: "I feel the same way about signing Mike Townsend as the Jets did when they got Joe Namath. This is a big catch for us and the league." Maybe, but nowhere near as big as Namath's signing with the Jets was.

Now that the team had a place to play, it set about the task of signing players. The team acquired NFL veteran defensive backs Solomon Brannan and Alvin

Wyatt, former Raider wide receiver Drew Buie, ex-Bills' kicker Grant Guthrie, and former Bengals' running back Ron Lamb.

"I had planned to sit this season out," said Lamb, who would alternate with Ricky Lake at fullback and also captain the special teams, "but when Bud Asher, the Sharks' coach, called and asked me to think about playing, I thought about it. They offered me a contract that was acceptable, and here I am."

Also signed on with the Sharks were ex-Packer and Ram running back Travis Williams, veteran defensive linemen Ike Lassiter, Vernon Vanoy, Ben Mayes and Bob Tatarek, and veteran quarterbacks Kay Stephenson and John Stofa.

Stofa had played for Asher in the Southern Football League in 1964 and 1965, throwing for 46 touchdowns and leading the Daytona Beach / Orlando Thunderbirds to a 22-2-and-2 record. After that, he was signed as a free agent by the expansion Dolphins.

In the 1966 season finale, Stofa started and threw for four touchdowns against Houston. He was predicted to be the starter for 1967, but on the second series of the season he broke his leg. That opened the way for a youngster named Bob Griese to step in, and he never left until 1980. Stofa went to Cincinnati in 1968 then returned to Miami to back-up Griese for a couple years. When Asher joined the Sharks, he got Stofa to come along with him.

The Sharks also signed quite a few of their college draft picks: tight end Keith Krepfle from Iowa State, defensive back Mike Townsend from Notre Dame, wide receiver Carl Swierc from Rice, Texas linebacker Glen Gaspard, offensive tackle Eddie Foster from Oklahoma, and defensive back John Osborne from Bethune Cookman.

Don't Mess with Ma Tech . . .

Another rookie in camp was a free agent named Eddie McAshan, a tall, rangy gunslinger-style quarterback who had made headlines by being the first black quarterback to start at a major Southern college. On Sept. 12th, 1970, McAshan started under center for Georgia Tech in a game that would be etched in ink in the school's history books. During the next three years, McAshan had a great college career with the Yellow Jackets, throwing for 32 touchdowns and compiling a 22-9-1 record as a starter. He was featured in *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. In 1972, he threw for five touchdowns against Rice. McAshan wound up setting 17 school records for Tech. But McAshan, a shy young man, had to endure not only the added stress of breaking a color barrier, but also bearing up under the added weight of racial taunts, slashed tires and being lynched in effigy. So when the university denied McAshan's request for extra family tickets to the season-ending game against Georgia in 1972, "It was what they call the last straw," McAshan said recently. When McAshan skipped a practice to protest the decision, coach Bill Fulcher suspended him from the Georgia game, which Tech lost, then extended the suspension to include the Liberty Bowl against Iowa State. Atlanta's black community rallied to McAshan's defense; Georgia Tech's athletic department and administration backed Fulcher. McAshan soon became a civil rights cause célèbre, receiving advice from black activists who tried to organize a boycott of the Liberty Bowl. His black teammates, fearing the loss of their scholarships, crossed an NAACP picket line outside the Liberty Bowl but wore black armbands in a show of support. McAshan later charged that Fulcher, in concert with others around the institute, colluded to make the suspension an extra game. An NCAA investigation ensued, but the investigation found nothing. "One of the first things you learned at Georgia Tech is that `Ma Tech' is unforgiving," said Karl Barnes, a teammate during the 1971–72 seasons. "Ma Tech would knock you down, and the strong would get back up and keep going." McAshan and Ma Tech kept going, but in opposite directions, an estrangement that would last nearly two decades. His troubles at Tech might have affected his draft status, because despite his solid statistics and obvious talent, McAshan wasn't drafted in 1973 until he was an afterthought by the Patriots in the 17th round, the 420th player selected. The Pats tried to make him a defensive back, and needless to say, he didn't last long. It looked like his football career was over, but when the Sharks were born, McAshan decided to give pro ball another shot.

So, it was a curious mix of young players and veterans that *The Sporting News* picked to finish second in the Eastern Division behind New York.

The Sharks opened camp on June 5th 1974 at Stetson University. Bugsy Engelberg, special assistant to Monaco, said six players had already been cut the day before and the team had already traded another

player—Jim Mankins—to Philadelphia for a future consideration.

Training camp opened with 108 players under contract—and one who wasn't. A young man by the name of George Hess literally "walked on" to the team, taking matters into his own hands when he was turned down by Engelberg, who had told him to try the minor-league Miami Buccaneers.

"I'm not very good at taking no for an answer," said Hess.

Monaco had announced that there would be no tryouts at camp, and that only players already under contract were invited.

That didn't stop Hess, who had driven four days from Weber State in Utah where he played fullback and linebacker. He just walked into the offices and took a physical exam. After passing that, he asked for a jersey, was given one, and then drove to the Stetson University field for afternoon practice. Hess moved to the area designated for the offensive backs, and before he knew it was taking handoffs from the quarterbacks. Still no one had asked him who the heck he was!

"A friend told me there were a lot of people around here and they can't remember everybody's name," said Hess. Sure enough, the Sharks had not written down any names, so nobody questioned Hess or his credentials.

"After I saw who I was playing with, I thought I could make the team," said Hess, "I wasn't trying to trespass or bother anybody. I just thought if I stayed around long enough to put pads on, the opportunity to make the team might present itself."

Pretty soon, however, a sharp-eyed reporter who had seen Engelberg turn Hess down for a tryout asked Bugsy why that same player was now eating lunch with the team. "He's eating your food, Bugsy!" the reporter exclaimed.

Later, while standing on the sidelines during practice, Engelberg was asked why the same player he had turned down for a tryout *and* had eaten a complimentary lunch was now taking handoffs from John Stofa and Kay Stephenson. Hess's cover was blown. Engelberg went up to him and asked Hess if he had a contract. When Hess said no, Engelberg conferred with head coach Bud Asher, and Hess was no longer a Shark.

"It was hard to accept after working months for this," Hess said dejectedly as he peeled the tape from his ankles.

Hess's story was not the only interesting one of training camp. A young man by the name of Tom Moore was offered a contract to punt for the Sharks. The interesting aspect of his story was that Moore was an ensign in the Navy, stationed at nearby Mayport.

"I hadn't kicked a ball since I left the Naval Academy," said Moore, "I just went out on a lark." Moore took a 45-day leave to try and make the Sharks. He believed he'd be good publicity for the Navy.

"I think that if I make the team, I can work something out with my commanding officer," said Moore, "Of course, I have to fly in the day of the game, and fly out that night."

Moore didn't make the team, but if he had it would have been a heckuva story.

It didn't take long for players cut by other WFL teams to start calling Engelberg. "A guy called me last night at 3am!" said Bugsy on the first day of camp.

Missing in camp was Travis Williams. The veteran running back, whose NFL career had been cut short in 1973 due to a knee injury, was going to give it another go with the Sharks, but decided a seventh year in pro football was one too many and retired for good.

Rumors circulated that NFL great Dick Butkus, whose brother Ron was the Shark's equipment manager, might be interested in joining the Sharks in the future as an investor.

"It will be Dick's personal decision whether he joins us in the future," said Monaco. "Needless to say, I'd love to have him.

"It's all my money up to this point," Monaco continued, "I'm the sole owner of the Sharks. This is not to say I won't sell stock. I have been approached. But I'll never sell more than 40 percent, if I sell that much."

Monaco was asked if he had sold the rights to his territory to the Orlando franchise. "Yes I did 'sell' the rights to the Orlando Blazers to operate in Central Florida," Monaco responded, "I haven't seen the money yet, and yes, the time is already past when I was supposed to see it."

The opener against New York introduced the country to Sharks' head coach Baron (Bud) Asher, whose previous team was New Smyrna Beach High School. Asher, who had once been an NFL scout, was hired by Monaco to run his Sharks. Asher had been a municipal judge in New Smyrna Beach and owned a hotel in Daytona, but he said, "Either you're a football coach or you're not. My record shows I am. I can get the football players you need, and I can coach them to win."

According to Gene Asher's book *Legends: Georgians who Lived Impossible Dreams*, Monaco was considering several successful college head coaches for the job of coaching his Sharks, and that he had never heard of Asher.

But that did not stop the resourceful Asher, who drove to Monaco's executive office in DeLand and told the owner, "You are going to be the owner of the first championship team in the World Football League. Now think about this: Monaco, champion of the World!"

By now Asher was sounding like a first-time director trying to sell a motion picture idea to Hollywood producers. "Everywhere I have been, I have been a winner," Asher said to Monaco, "My Pop Warner team won a national championship, my semi-pro team was undefeated, and my New Smyrna Beach High School team, which had not had a winning season in six years, won two region championships."

Monaco was impressed, probably more by Asher's chutzpah than his actual coaching resume. But in the end, Asher was his man for the job.

Asher's first win was indeed a tribute to his coaching. The Sharks and the Stars, tied 7-7, were heading toward pro football's first regular-season overtime game when ex-Raider Ike Lassiter blocked a punt with 2 minutes to play. The Sharks' Rich Thomann scooped up the ball and ran it to the New York seven. Two plays later, when Tommy Durrance tried to score from the two and fumbled, offensive tackle O. Z. White was right there to pounce on it for the touchdown.

"The ball was there and I saw it," White exclaimed in the locker room, "That was it!"

The Sharks won the game, 14-7.

The coach explained to reporters that the blocked punt resulted from a special rush he had installed specifically for the game. It seemed that one Saturday Asher conducted a team workout in the morning, and then boarded a plane to New York. He drove to a high school field out on Long Island where he bought a $2 ticket and sat in the stands as New York scrimmaged Philadelphia. Noting a weakness in the Stars' blocking alignment on punts, he was back in Jacksonville that night designing ways to take advantage of it.

"This is my pattern," said Asher, "You win with defense and a good kicking game. We bore this out on Alvin Wyatt's punt return and Ike Lassiter's block of their punt."

Wyatt's 87-yard punt return for a touchdown had broken a scoreless deadlock in the second quarter.

"I'm glad it was on TV," said Wyatt, who had been let go by the Raiders, Oilers and Bills, "I know those NFL coaches who cut me saw it. They know I can play."

"I don't think Notre Dame has a greater spirit than the Jacksonville Sharks," Thomann, a former Golden Domer, said jubilantly in the locker room.

The game drew 59,112 people to the Gator Bowl, the largest crowd of the season's first week.

"That's tops in the league and that's where we want to be—on top," said an exuberant Monaco.

At the post-game press conference, Asher held the diminutive Monaco in his arms like a groom carrying a bride across the threshold. Later, the coach dropped trou at a party to reveal a silver shark sewn onto the seat of his underwear.

The warm, fuzzy feelings did not last long. First off, there had been an issue at the opener with the owner's wife, Douglas Monaco. Asher quickly found out that Mrs. Monaco loved her twin poodles and liked to walk them—during the game! Up and down the field. On the Sharks' sidelines. In front of the team's bench area. Who knows, Asher might even have said to himself or someone nearby, "Who let the dogs out?" Asher kept quiet and did a slow burn, but the dogs would become, if you'll pardon the pun, a bone of contention during his stay as head coach.

In Chicago, a week later, the game was tied late, 22-22 and looked to be heading for overtime when a pass interference call on the Sharks moved the ball within field goal range. A couple runs set up the game-winning kick for Chicago with six seconds left.

"No comment," was all Bud Asher had to say after the loss.

Jacksonville then hosted Southern California before another decent crowd of 46,783 in the Gator Bowl. Grant Guthrie kicked a record four field goals to give the Sharks a 12-0 lead, and the defense was suffocating the Sun, mixing up their coverages and blitzing to confuse quarterback Tony Adams. The Sharks' veteran defensive line, led by old pros Lassiter and Bob Tatarek, overwhelmed the all-rookie offensive line of Southern California. Unfortunately, most of the fans in attendance at the Gator Bowl didn't notice the Sharks' performance. On the third play of the game, a cargo ship anchored in the St. John's River just outside the Gator Bowl exploded and caught fire, and many of the fans moved to the rim of the stadium to watch the blaze.

The Sun came back from their 12-0 deficit, but the Sharks scored on a 16-yard Kay Stephenson-to-Tony Lomax touchdown pass with 14:56 left to move ahead again, 19-15. That just set the stage for Adams' last second 40-yard bomb to Dave Williams to win it with no time left on the clock.

"I can't tell you how much this hurts, losing two in a row like that," said Asher in the locker room, "If we'd scored just one touchdown instead of any of those field goals, we'd . . ." His voice, trembling to begin with, trailed off.

In New York, the Sharks lost two quarterbacks and their third game in a row.

Trailing 24-16 at the end of the third quarter, the Sharks saw their starting quarterback, Kay Stephenson, helped off the field after suffering cartilage damage to his left knee and bruised ribs.

Asher shuttled part-time lawyer Kim Hammond into the game. On his first play, which was the first play of the last quarter, Hammond was sacked by James Sims. On the next play, Hammond was hit by defensive tackle John Elliott and toppled over into defensive end Jerry Ellison's knee. After a few minutes, he left the field with a concussion.

Asher was in a bind. He didn't have any quarterbacks left on the bench. He considered suiting up John Stofa, but because he was on the inactive list, that would have meant a forfeit for the Sharks.

On the bench was a rookie running back named Jeff Davis from someplace named Mars Hill College in North Carolina. He had been the 441st and next to last player chosen in the 1973 NFL draft. He was then one of the last players cut by the Redskins, and had opened the '74 season on the Sharks' inactive list, but had been activated in time for the game in New York. As a freshman at South Gwinnett High School in Snellville, Georgia, Davis had been a reserve quarterback. That would have to be good enough for Asher, who said afterward, "He's the only kid we had left."

After getting a quick crash course on taking the snap from center Tom Johnson, Davis stepped into the frying pan.

"We didn't have anyone else," Davis said after the game, "I knew the offense. There wasn't much choice. Somebody had to do it. But it's a hard way to make the team."

On his first series, Davis kept it on the ground, handing off three straight times to Ricky Lake for a total of eight yards. The Sharks had to punt.

The Stars also went three-and-out and Jacksonville got the ball back at their own 43-yard line with 8:52 left. Davis, using mostly quarterback sweeps to both the right and left, sparked the offense to life. He picked up 4 yards on first down, then, after Lake was stopped for no gain, carried himself for seven and the first down in New York territory. Davis' play was frustrating the Stars.

"He's a different type of quarterback," said Elliott, "We weren't mentally prepared for that sort of game. It's hard to change in the middle of the game."

After Tommy Durrance took a pitch out and gained nothing, Davis called his own number again. This time the rookie zipped around end for six yards. On third and four, Davis kept it himself again, and raced all the way to the New York 12 before Sims finally stopped him.

"We were driving on the ground," said Davis, "but sooner or later I knew I had to put the ball in the air. I just wanted to throw it into the end zone, have two or three receivers around and hope one of them would catch it."

After Davis gained three yards to the nine, and a run by Durrance was stopped for no gain, Davis tried his first pass, throwing it to Tony Lomax in the end zone. Lomax caught the ball but the officials said he was out of bounds. Davis argued but to no avail. "He was in," the rookie insisted to the official, "He dragged his foot across the line! That's all it takes—one foot!"

But Davis' argument fell on deaf ears, and that made it fourth down. Once again, the rookie threw the ball into the end zone. This time his toss was intercepted by Lou Angelo.

The Sharks got the ball back at the New York 35 with 50 seconds left. Davis completed his first pass for 12 yards to Lomax. The rookie tried to hit Dennis Hughes but the pass fell incomplete. Davis' next pass was knocked down at the line of scrimmage. On third down, Davis went to Hughes in the end zone but the pass was broken up. Finally, on fourth and 10, Davis threw another pass into the end zone for Hughes. Jeff Woodcock broke it up and the Stars ran out the clock to win it, 24-16.

After the game, Asher railed at reporters.

"It was a terrible feeling," said the coach, "The fourth quarter had just started and we had no one. Stephenson had rib and knee damage and Hammond a concussion. We are allowed only a 37-man roster. It started at 33, but we fought it up to 35 and then 37."

Asher wanted the WFL to adopt 40 man rosters, the same as the NFL.

He had not won the game, but Jeff Davis had written his name into WFL lore and legend.

"There was no pressure," he said later, "No one expected anything."

Asher quickly activated rookie quarterbacks Eddie McAshan and Reggie Oliver to avoid having to grab someone off the bench to play under center.

In Week Five, the Sharks hosted The Hawaiians on August 8th before a good crowd of 43,869 people in the Gator Bowl. Prior to the game, Fran Monaco denied rumors that Asher's job depended on winning, and was, indeed in jeopardy.

"This is the first I've heard of any rumors to that effect," said Monaco, "Win, lose or draw, as long as I'm the owner of this franchise, Bud Asher's my coach. He

has my vote of confidence. He can't go out there and win games for us himself."

The press was now on alert, of course—Asher had just gotten the dreaded "vote of confidence" from his owner, a sure sign he was going to be fired.

Trailing for much of the game, during which the crowd listened on the P.A. system to President Richard Nixon giving his "I am resigning" speech, the Sharks scored two fourth quarter touchdowns under the direction of the rookie quarterback McAshan, who had replaced starter Reggie Oliver.

"Oliver did a fine job but hurt his hand," said Asher.

McAshan rushed for 52 yards on 11 carries and completed 5 passes for 88 yards. He dove over from the one with 20 seconds left to cap an 80-yard drive and snap a 14-14 tie and give Jacksonville the victory.

"I hope they (New England) saw the game," said McAshan, "Oh, how I hope they were watching. There was no way I shouldn't have made that team (Patriots)." McAshan had been cut by the Patriots in 1973.

"I knew all along that McAshan would be a great quarterback," added Asher. McAshan tried to add the action point after his winning touchdown but was stopped and hurt his knee on the play. X-rays revealed that the injury was a twisted knee, which had given McAshan trouble in the past. He was listed as doubtful for the Sharks' next game in Orlando.

The defense, criticized by Asher after the loss to New York a week earlier, held The Hawaiians to 158 yards in total offense.

After the game, Asher answered the rumors about the end of his own career as coach of the Sharks. "I became aware today about a report that my job might hinge on us winning against Hawaii when Monaco called me and told me there had been a story about this," said Asher, "He told me win, lose or draw I'm going to be his football coach as long as he has the franchise."

Asher and Monaco both also denied rumors that the head coach was being undermined by "backstabbing" by one or several assistant coaches on the Sharks' staff.

Say What?

After Eddie McAshan led the Sharks to a 21-14 comeback win over The Hawaiians, owner Fran Monaco actually said, "McAshan is another Johnny Unitas."

A few days after the win over The Hawaiians, Asher got into some hot water with the league office by complaining about the WFL's officiating.

Asher told reporters that the WFL "has the worst officiating imaginable. We complained to the league office . . . they know it's bad but won't do anything about it. Those are high school officials working pro games."

Asher was given an official reprimand from the commissioner's office for making the critical public comments, and was warned that he'd be fined if he made any further comments.

The Sharks announced that they had signed Baltimore Colts' linebacker Ted "The Stork" Hendricks to a future contract for 1975. Hendricks' contract called for the Sharks to pay him $350,000 in 1975, a figure Monaco reportedly arrived at when he found out that the highest-paid player in the NFL made $340,000. But despite shelling out astronomical sums for NFL talent and the seemingly solid attendance figures, the team was actually in some financial straits. It was later learned that Monaco and his wife had to borrow $27,000 from their head coach to help cover the team's payroll.

Next on the schedule was division and state rival Florida. Asher told reporters he was concerned about the upcoming game against the Blazers because of a recent spate of injuries, especially McAshan, who was ruled out for the contest. Asher said he was deciding between the rookie Oliver, and veterans Stofa and Hammond as the possible starter, and added he was leaning toward Oliver.

In Orlando, the Sharks fell behind Florida 31-11 but rallied and almost came all the way back, finally losing by a score of 33-26. Reggie Oliver threw to Tom Whittier for a 7-yard touchdown and ran 12 yards for another. Ron Coppenbarger picked up a fumble and raced 27 yards for another score.

On Friday, two days after the loss to the Blazers, the Sharks, according to Bud Asher, had a very spirited practice session. It was a "vicious gem," according to the head coach, "We got tough, nobody got hurt, and the players were yelling, screaming and ready to rip Birmingham's tail next Wednesday night."

That night, defensive backfield coach Johnny Robinson suddenly handed in his resignation. On Saturday morning, Monaco abruptly canned Asher.

"It was simply time to make a change," said Monaco, "I came to Jacksonville to give the fans a winner, and I felt the change was necessary to correct this."

"It was kind of sad," Ron Lamb said, "but I think it will help us in the long run. Bud Asher had come to the team from a high school job, and he had a lot of his own ideas. He liked to call all the plays from the sidelines and he wanted the Veer offense. Somehow though a lot of the guys didn't go for the way he ran things."

Charlie Tate, an affable, cigar chomping assistant, was named head coach to replace Asher. "I'll take the ball and run with it," said the new head man, but then added, "It's a sad situation. It's not the easiest thing to get into a position this way."

Monaco said he picked Tate because "he has a real amount of football knowledge and he's an excellent offensive coach."

The owner added that no additions would be made to the coaching staff and that Tate would serve as both offensive coordinator and head coach. He went on to say that Asher had been offered another position within the organization but had turned it down.

That afternoon, interestingly enough, Robinson rescinded his resignation and re-joined the team. Jim Chitwood, in announcing that bit of news, declined to say if there was a connection between Asher's firing and Robinson's return.

But the next day, during an impromptu interview with several members of the Florida Sports Writers Association, Asher let everyone know that there was indeed a connection between his firing and Robinson's resignation and return.

"My greatest disappointment was that Monaco didn't have the backbone, the plain guts, to stand up to a couple of disloyal assistant coaches who were shooting off their mouth," an obviously agitated Asher told the reporters as he noisily crunched ice cubes while drinking a Coke, "Of course I was shocked. Monaco had called me the night before to say what he had said often, that I would be his coach as long as he owned the franchise.

"It's strange," Asher continued, "Monaco just told me that he was going to tell our squad that if they didn't quit bellyaching and play football that he would trade them. Then he listens to the bellyaching of the very troublemakers involved and then fires me."

When asked who these troublemakers were, Asher said that Russ Faulkinberry and (surprise!) Johnny Robinson were the two assistants who gave him the most grief.

"I told the staff after the Orlando game that we had too many people trying to be head coach," Asher said, "that we had too many chiefs. I told them that this team would now take on the personality of teams I have coached in the past.

"That we'd become a tail bustin' team that gang-tackled in practice and worked with blind devotion all the way," Asher, on a roll, went on, "I told my assistants if they didn't like it that way they could resign right there." Johnny Robinson obviously took Asher up on his challenge and resigned on Friday.

"I then find out that Robinson and some of the players went down to Monaco's house (in DeLand) and had a little session to criticize me," Asher stated, "Now isn't that a way to run a pro football team?"

Asher, still gathering steam, continued his tirade. "One guy rapping my offensive plan was (Alvin) Wyatt, our so-called hotshot defensive back," Asher said, "What does he know about offense? Wyatt is a guy who was traded by three NFL teams as an undesirable. Then his words are used for Fran to make up his mind and fire me."

Asher said that Wyatt's "main beef was that I scathed his tail for his hot-dogging tactics on the field. Hell, he cost us the Orlando game. He gambles for interceptions, the big play, and doesn't play team football."

He also singled out another defensive back, Ron Coppenbarger, saying he "has on several occasions not listened to the defensive calls."

Asher described his job with the Sharks as "mostly refereeing childish skirmishes, childish things, between a bunch of grown men."

Asher then turned his wrath toward the owner, saying that Monaco was constantly sticking his nose into coaching business on the sidelines.

"He was always asking why I didn't let Charlie (Tate) call all the offensive plays," Asher declared, "He yelled at me after one play backfired and said, 'Why didn't you let Charlie call that play?' and I told him, 'Charlie did call it!'"

Asher affirmed that he and Tate were still good friends and added, "I wish him well personally and asked if there was anything at all I could do to make it easier for him.

"I just hope for his sake the owner stays off the field."

Of course, the reporters immediately went to Monaco to ask him about the whole situation, and Monaco denied ever making such the promise to Asher that "he'd be his coach as long as he owned the franchise," although Monaco had made that exact comment before the game against The Hawaiians. The owner then got a bit testy when asked about rumors that the Sharks attendance figures had been inflated and that they, like Philadelphia, had papered the house.

"It's none of your damn business," Monaco snapped.

But despite Monaco's denials, the rumors of inflated attendance figures did indeed turn out to be true. Jacksonville, like Philadelphia, had "papered the house"—inflated their attendance figures—by adding free tickets and discounted tickets into their total attendance figure.

"The games were pretty darn exciting," Sharks' assistant coach Howard Tippett said. "I remember our first game. We played the Stars and beat them, 14-7, in front of 60,000 people. Of course I didn't know at the time 30,000 tickets were freebies."

By giving away tickets, the Sharks had just done the same thing that sports teams had done for years, routinely giving away tickets for promotions to radio stations and supermarkets, and discount tickets for businesses. In most of these cases, however, these tickets involve a small percentage of the total attendance figure. It seemed that the Sharks had instead managed to turn the practice of giving out tickets into some kind of weird art form. After an IRS audit, the Sharks had to admit that a significant number of their tickets had either been freebies or given away at a large discount.

Executive Vice President Danny Bridges said that the 105,892 admissions to the two games included 44,000 free tickets. Monaco, however, disputed that claim, saying that only 30,000 free ducats were issued for the first two home games.

Monaco added that Bridges' figure was incorrect because 14,000 of the tickets were sold at a reduced rate. Like that made the situation any better!

Monaco then played the kiddie card by stating that most of the tickets went to the Little League and the Pop Warner League. "We are a new league," Monaco explained, "and I have to come to Jacksonville to try and build something that not only Fran Monaco can be proud of, but the city as well.

"Why shouldn't I be allowed to let in the youth of Jacksonville . . . and at the same time display my product to the parents who accompany these children?

"Let's not forget that it's my money, my worry and my expense going into this venture."

So at the very same time, Monaco managed to try to make himself sound like both a giving philanthropist *and* a sympathetic figure. At least the Philadelphia folks just admitted they did it, and didn't try to shovel some drek about how they were wonderful humanitarians, too.

As Charlie Vincent wrote in his column for The Sporting News, "That proves those people wrong who said, 'The WFL? They won't be able to give tickets away!'"

On August 21st, the Sharks lost to Birmingham, 15-14, before 27,140 people, the first home game after the "Papergate" scandal was revealed, and the seventh straight Jacksonville game in which the contest wasn't decided until the last two minutes. Unfortunately, the Sharks had now lost five of those seven games.

The Sharks did hold the unbeaten Americans scoreless for three quarters, capitalizing on interceptions and fumbles to hold off Birmingham. But the Americans, a club used to last minute decisions, scored late to win it.

"We fought right down to the last minute and played well enough to win," said Tate, "I have nothing but praise for our club. It showed courage. We can play with anybody in this league. We fought the best in the WFL right down to the wire."

"We've got 13 more games to go and we're not giving up," said defensive back Ron Coppenbarger, one of the primary critics of Bud Asher, "I'm sorry about what's happened here the past several days, but I think it was for the best. Coach Tate's a heckuva coach. He's a great offensive mind and we've got more enthusiasm than we ever had. It showed out there tonight because we really wanted to win this one."

The Sharks flew to Honolulu to play The Hawaiians, and Tate told reporters, "It would be a real shot in the arm if we could win this one. We are playing better every week."

Tate decided to give Reggie Oliver the starting nod at quarterback after his play against Birmingham the week before. "I think I've earned the top spot," the rookie said before the game, "and I believe the team has confidence in me too, which might be the most important thing."

The rookie quarterback then went out and proved he'd earned the top spot, throwing two long touchdown passes to whip The Hawaiians in sunny Honolulu 14-8, giving Charlie Tate his first win as coach of the Sharks. Oliver connected with Edgar Scott for 47 yards in the first quarter, and then Drew Buie for 36 yards for the winner late in the fourth quarter.

"We've lost some heartbreakers ourselves," Tate said afterward about the last quarter come from behind win, "We were lucky to win this one in Hawaii's backyard."

At home against Memphis, before 22,169 fans in the Gator Bowl on Labor Day, the Sharks, like they had all season, came close but couldn't close the deal. Memphis scored a fourth-quarter touchdown to erase a 13-8 Jacksonville lead and send the Sharks to their sixth loss in nine games, all six of them by seven points or less.

"You can't ask a bunch of guys to play harder," said Charlie Tate, "We're still trying to get consistency at quarterback. Kay Stephenson put us in the game with his passing, but unfortunately two interceptions took us right out."

Reggie Oliver started at quarterback but was yanked after going 5 of 11 for only 38 yards. Stephenson

completed 12 of 23 for 166 yards, but the two interceptions, plus an anemic rushing attack that gained only 30 yards, doomed the Sharks to another bitter defeat.

Oliver, lifted on Monday against Memphis, came back strong just three days later, throwing for 321 yards as the Sharks rallied past Philadelphia, 34-30, before 17,851 rain-soaked fans in the Gator Bowl.

It was the fifth straight home game in which the attendance figure had declined. As attendance decreased the funds started to dry up, and for the first time—and certainly not the last—the Sharks players were forced to take a vote on whether to play without pay.

The Bell led at one point, 23-11, but Oliver brought his troops back. A 48-yard pass to Edgar Scott set up an 8-yard touchdown run by Tommy Durrance. A fumbled punt by the Bell put the Sharks in position for another Durrance scoring jaunt that put Jacksonville in the lead, 26-23. Oliver then completed passes to Dennis Hughes and Mike Burnop and another 13-yarder to Drew Buie for the score and a 34-23 edge and basically the ball game.

"They blitzed a lot," said Oliver, "We started out doing some things we hadn't shown against them. They stunt and we tried deeper passes, pop passes. We didn't get a lot of points till the end, when they had to get the ball. But we got them away from what they like. They blitzed themselves out of the game."

A week later, Oliver put the ball in the air 59 times—completing 29—but the Sharks lost to Philadelphia, 41-22 in overtime in a 4 hour and 35 minute marathon in JFK Stadium.

The Sharks rallied from a 22-8 deficit as Oliver scored on a 1-yard run and threw a 16-yard scoring pass to Dennis Hughes. But the offense did little in the overtime period, as Oliver was intercepted twice, once for a touchdown. A last incompletion by Oliver finally ended the game at a quarter of one in the morning.

Owner Fran Monaco missed his first road game of the season as he desperately searched for new investors, telling reporters that if he couldn't find any new backers he might be forced to sell the franchise.

Meanwhile, the Sharks had voted for the second week in a row to play without pay, working on a promise that they would eventually get their money. The game with Portland would go on.

Due to the NFL cuts, the Sharks had five new players on hand for their game with Portland: offensive guard Howard Kindig, released by the Redskins, offensive tackle Mike Haggerty, cut loose by the Lions, offensive lineman Buck Baker, let go by the Jets, defensive tackle Carleton Oates, released by the Chiefs, and linebacker Stan Cherry, cut by the Colts. Rookie wide receiver Carl Swierc was also signed and added to the roster.

But the new players didn't help matters. "We did it again," Charlie Tate said after the Sharks blew another lead late against the Storm, "We have a patent on losing in the last minute." This time, Portland kicked a field goal in the last two seconds to edge Jacksonville, 19-17.

Jacksonville trailed 16-3 entering the last quarter, when Tate put Kay Stephenson in the game. The NFL veteran sparked a two touchdown comeback that delighted the 16,041 fans in the Gator Bowl. Finally, Stephenson's 25-yard pass to Carl Swierc put the Sharks ahead, 17-16 with a little over a minute to play. But Jacksonville could not hold the lead, as the Storm marched 70 yards to the winning field goal.

Going into Week 13, Monaco finally admitted that his team was in deep financial trouble and that he was considering offers from two other cities to move the club. He added that he would do everything in his power to keep the team in Jacksonville.

"For the past month I've been paying for the Jacksonville Sharks out of my own money," said Monaco, "This can only go on so long before something has to be done.

"I've tried my dead level best to do all I can to keep this team afloat," Monaco went on, "But it only takes two or three bad gates and you're in deep trouble in professional sports. You believe in God, don't you? Then say a little prayer for us."

Monaco told reporters that the Sharks had voted to play without salary for the past two weeks. But he said they would be "paid in full."

"As for the players going without pay, seven of the 12 WFL teams have a system where they pay once a month," Monaco explained, "My system was to pay every week, but because of our three games in one week that we had last week, we fell behind."

The players voted to defer their salaries knowing that the team was bonded by the WFL and all contracts would be honored no matter what happened.

Monaco would not reveal the two cities that were interested in the Sharks because the talks were still tentative and above all else he hoped to keep the team in Jacksonville.

"When I first thought about starting the Sharks in Jacksonville, I was approached by some prominent people who asked me to hold off on commitments to outside investors and make this a community project," said Monaco, "This I have tried diligently to do, but if Jacksonville just won't support the Sharks, then what is left to do?"

"I haven't sold the Sharks, and as of now they are still in Jacksonville," said Monaco, "But I have been having conferences with potential investors over the past 48 hours and they are continuing.

"I've had two offers which would move them to a metropolitan city, but I'm not at liberty to identify them."

A source said that both Washington, D.C. and Cleveland were possible new sites for the beleaguered franchise.

Monaco added that he had been approached by numerous potential investors, but he said they all wanted the same stipulation—that the purchase be for 51 percent of the team, which would mean a controlling interest. He was not willing to do that.

Monaco continued by saying he had to cut short his road trip to Philadelphia with the team to meet with several potential buyers. "I wish I could be with my ballclub tonight more than anything," said Monaco, "but at this moment this is a very important matter that requires my total attention.

"We have not been supported in Jacksonville, and when you cannot average 30,000 fans a game, you're facing obvious problems in professional sports," Monaco concluded.

The lack of fans was really beginning to hit the team in its wallet. Jacksonville City Auditor Gene McLeod said that the gate receipts from the Sharks' last two home games, on September 2nd and 5th, were not enough to cover the $7,500 rental payment on the Gator Bowl.

"We have been taking the $7,500 out of money we have collected from ticket sales. Up until the last two games, that was sufficient."

McLeod said the city collected $13,100 for the last two games, and then added that the remaining $1,900 would have to be paid within 30 days.

Now $1,900 might not seem like a lot of money, but to the woeful Sharks, it must have looked like a fortune.

Monaco had more troubles on his hands. On the same day he gave his "State of the Sharks" address, Monaco was having a lawsuit filed against him by former coach Bud Asher.

Asher filed the suit in Volusia County charging breach of contract for payment of $30,000 per year. Asher was asking Monaco to honor his three-year contract.

Sharks' legal counsel John Godby, a DeLand attorney, said, "The suit is quite lengthy and he's asking for damages. But I really can't say what he's asking for and I really don't think he knows either. To tell you the truth, I don't know what he is asking. He's asking for a suit against the original contract which incidentally he drew up himself. You know he's also a lawyer."

Asher had been working at Bethune-Cookman College but had hopes of returning to coach in the Wiffle and he said he had several "things lined up."

On September 23rd, two days before they were to play in Anaheim, the WFL took over control of the Sharks, which had been unable to meet player payrolls for four weeks, even though the team was second in the league in attendance. Shark players said they would not make the trip cross-country for a game with the Southern California Sun unless they got their pay.

"Before the game there was a lot of talk about boycotts and not going on the trip," remembered running back Tommy Durrance, "I remember thinking, 'If these guys aren't going to pay us, we shouldn't play, we should go home and go to work.' I had a business to go back to but some of the other guys didn't."

WFL Commissioner Gary Davidson lured them West with a promise of a payday. The team voted to fly to California. At 9am on the morning of the 25th, Davidson arrived at the Holiday Inn in Buena Vista where the Sharks were staying. He personally handed out $65,000 in paychecks to the team.

That night, the Sharks looked understandably disinterested and disillusioned and lost to Southern California, 57-7, the biggest margin of defeat in the short history of the WFL.

Southern California cruised to a 46-0 halftime lead, during which a Sharks' club official was heard to say that "we only have three guys putting out." The Sun recorded 23 first downs and gained 569 yards in offense. The score might have been 64-0 if the Sun hadn't fumbled on the Jacksonville 5-yard line late in the game. Reggie Oliver then guided the Sharks 95 yards in 9 plays to score with just 1:58 left, but that only averted a shutout.

"We were embarrassed," said Charlie Tate, "We were inept in every phase of the game. We have had a chaotic situation the last four or five weeks, but that is no excuse for what happened. We stood around and did nothing. I saw no indication from our players before that anything like this was going to happen."

"We went out there and played, and we lost the game, and when we returned I think the guys got one check from the league," said Durrance.

Quarterback Kim Hammond, on the injured list and a lawyer in the off-season, became the team spokesman and tried to get help from the WFL front office. "It's a shabby way to run a railroad," said Hammond, "It's a rotten situation. Gary Davidson has lost credibility

with us. We were promised by him that we would be paid. We have had only one paycheck in the last five.

"The league owes us something like $300,000 in back pay," Hammond continued, "During one seven-week period, we got paid just once. I know some guys who are in terrible shape because of what's happened. I place the blame squarely on Gary Davidson and his group of financial adventurers. We haven't dealt with truthfulness anywhere along the line. And if you can't believe the commissioner, who can you believe?"

Many of the Shark players were in an ever increasing money crunch and several were seeking employment in the National Football League. NFL veteran Howard Kindig, picked up by the Sharks after being cut by Washington, said he hadn't been paid in six weeks and Hammond, acting on his behalf, contended that Kindig was a free agent. Kindig soon wound up on the roster of the New York Jets.

"No one knew what kind of trouble the club was in until it got out that the players hadn't been paid for a couple of games," said Maynard Eilers of the *Florida Times Union*.

Like any good newsman, Eilers did some digging and found some more dirt. He discovered that the team's uniforms had not been paid for, and that the team owed a stack of bills including hotel costs.

The league tried to peddle the Sharks to anyone who would assume the team's debts. A Chicago group led by former Bears' linebacker Dick Butkus showed some interest, and Butkus even went to Jacksonville with a certified check for more than $375,000. He learned, however, and said he was "very disturbed" that the league wanted at least $100,000 more in advance.

Another prospective buyer was Morton O'Neal, a Miami contractor, who originally asked for an option to buy, but who then made "a legitimate offer to buy," according to Jim Chitwood of the team's front office.

"I was willing to put $100,000 a week into the club," said O'Neal, "We would have taken over the obligation of the club, but I wanted to be reimbursed if I decided not to buy the club. After all, I'm a businessman first and a sports fan second."

His attempt to buy the club was vetoed by the league, however, which irritated the penniless Sharks. "He (O'Neal) came up here and met with the league's man (Chuck Rohe, who had originally held the rights to the team and was acting as the club's GM for the league)," said Hammond, "He said he was prepared to come up with the money for the Blazers' game (which had been postponed) and returned to Miami with the understanding further meetings would be held. But no one showed up on Sunday and then nobody showed up on Monday. Apparently, what they (the WFL) wanted to do was stick him (O'Neal) with the debts of the Detroit Wheels too. That's ridiculous. I have trouble believing someone can sleep with this kind of attitude. They keep telling us we'll get our money but no money shows up. This could drag on for weeks. It's like us (*sic*) football players are subhuman."

A week after the debacle in Anaheim, the discouraged Sharks traveled to Memphis. Once again, the team put up very little in the way of a fight. Memphis shredded the Sharks' defense for 270 yards rushing. Willie Spencer ran at will, scoring five touchdowns. Jacksonville turned the ball over six times and Reggie Oliver was sacked four times, once for a safety. The final score was 47-19, Memphis. The Shark players had obviously started to lose hope.

The loss to Memphis turned out to be the last game in the history of the Jacksonville Sharks. The league finally pulled the plug on the Sharks after 14 games; the folding of the Jacksonville franchise meant that the Gator Bowl would not host World Bowl I. (Coincidentally, Jacksonville was also slated to be the host of the 1986 USFL Championship Game, but that game was never played as the USFL folded).

Jacksonville Mayor Hans Tanzler, as well as other city officials, was incensed by how the Sharks had gone "belly up."

"The WFL shouldn't have let someone come in here who could only handle the payroll for a few weeks," Tanzler told the media, "this is a disgrace."

The financial losses incurred by the Sharks franchise were indeed mind-boggling: Jacksonville was liquidated owing nearly $4 million to creditors. Some of the now former Sharks were talking of filing fraud-and-deceit suits against the team's former owner and the WFL.

In December, Fran Monaco told Jonathan Rand of the *Miami News* that the whole situation had "been like a nightmare to me. I've worked hard all my life and I don't believe in putting up a false front. There are creditors around who haven't been paid and I've had to take the brunt of the criticism. That's what bothers me."

Monaco told Rand that Gary Davidson blamed the Sharks' demise on mismanagement by Monaco. But Monaco countered by describing his dealings with the league as a series of unhonored contracts and misleading sales pitches.

Monaco told Rand that he was considering taking the WFL to court. He said that the Wiffle had not honored its contract with him that was signed on September 23rd, which he stated said that the WFL

was going to assume the Sharks' debts and operations and in separate action would settle up with Monaco. "It could wind up in court if they don't honor my contract," he told Rand.

Monaco also told Rand that he still had not been paid the $1 million owed to him by the Florida Blazers for the territorial rights to Central Florida. "I have never been paid my territorial rights. I never saw it," said Monaco.

Monaco went on to say that he was misled by Davidson on the financial strength of the league's other franchises, some of which, he said, were just given away. "I paid for mine and I have the receipts," Monaco stressed.

Finally, Monaco told Rand that the WFL's first-year leadership left a lot to be desired. "The league should have been controlled by the owners all along, like it is now, not by the organizers," he told Rand.

Of course, the chief organizer of the Wiffle was Davidson. "I like Gary, he's a personable man," Monaco told Rand, "Gary was a promoter. But he helped certain franchises. I believe if you help one franchise, you should help all franchises. I did not get any financial help from the league."

Reports that four or maybe five WFL franchises were handed out like candy "hurt the other owners so much," said Monaco, who added that his investment in the league was based largely on the alleged solvency of his fellow owners.

"The picture painted to me was throughout the league these franchises were run by legitimate people," Monaco said, "My advisors tell me that buying a franchise is the same thing as buying a security. I just learned that afterwards."

Monaco, like most of his WFL colleagues, blamed the nation's terrible economy for most of the new league's problems. A healthier economy could have compensated for a lot of the organizational sins the league committed.

Monaco told Rand that the best time to start the league would have been '75 instead of '74. "This is what I would've preferred: prepare yourself and go at it in '75," Monaco said, "That way you've prepared for the stability and credibility of your franchise.

"I think the big mistake was for the organizers to go to 12 teams," Monaco offered, "It should have been eight teams right from the start. When they dropped Jacksonville and Detroit, I think that was the downfall for the WFL. That really hurt them."

While Monaco may have had some legitimate beefs, a lot of his problems, like those of his fellow owners, were self-inflicted. He overextended himself and rang up debts of a little over $1.85 million. When the team was finally dropped from the league schedule, the players were owed around $250,000 in salaries. Monaco's front office was woefully weak on football expertise. His lease agreement with the Gator Bowl left him with little financial leverage. Then there was that business of borrowing money from his head coach and then canning him. Not to mention papering the house.

"I made mistakes myself," Monaco admitted to Rand, saying he was not blaming all of his problems on Davidson.

In the end, Davidson and his gang of merry pranksters made a lot of mistakes. But, like a lot of his fellow owners, Monaco also made a lot of the same mistakes and poor decisions that ultimately killed his franchise and any hopes it had of succeeding. As Jonathan Rand said himself at the end of the interview with Monaco, "The WFL had insufficient funds in front and practically nothing behind it. Perhaps Monaco's business sense should have told him to pass. But a man realizing a lifelong dream does not care to be pinched."

CHAPTER 11

Take Off, Eh?

The Memphis Southmen, 1974

"The Mounties chased us to the border."

—Head Coach JOHN MCVAY

Along with Birmingham, another positive aspect of the WFL in 1974 was the team in Memphis, Tennessee named the Southmen. Memphis was a first-class operation, run by John F. Bassett, Jr. Thanks to Bassett, the team got paid on time, did well at the gate, had a tremendous season, and avoided many of the foibles, shenanigans and all around ineptitude suffered by some of their brethren.

The Southmen actually began life north of the border as the Toronto Northmen. Bassett, one of Davidson's WHA pals who owned that league's Toronto Toros, wanted to put a football team in his hometown as well.

Bassett was an authentic millionaire. Unlike others in Davidson's stable, Bassett had the cash to back himself up. He came from a wealthy family and had controlling interests in television stations, newspapers and a film company. If anyone could put up a fight against the NFL, it was Bassett. He had the money to run his club efficiently as well as dangle offers in front of NFL talent.

His goal was to place a football team in Toronto, but rumors circulated that the Canadian government was beginning to make noises about having an American football team on Canadian soil. They thought an American football team in Canada could help destroy the CFL. Bassett figured that he would move to the States if he had to, but he preferred not to.

The rumors of trouble in Canada, however, soon blew up into a huge controversy. Canadian Football League Commissioner Jake Gaudaur did not like the idea of a WFL team intruding on Canadian soil and possibly raiding CFL talent, and John Barrow, GM of the Toronto Argonauts, stated that the WFL had already begun its scheme to possibly bury the CFL.

Health and Welfare Minister Marc LaLonde issued a statement saying that he would make a very concerted effort to keep any and all American pro football teams out of Canada. That effort would include refusing to grant work permits to the WFL's American players.

"What LaLonde is really concerned about," Bassett claimed, "is the possibility of the NFL coming to Montreal, because the French community prefers the NFL to the CFL."

Bassett simply dug his heels in and became even more determined to put a team in Toronto. He scouted for playing sites, and even laid plans to build his own major-league facility. He hired Leo Cahill as GM and had a list of NFL stars he was ready to pursue.

"The sports fans were behind the team in Toronto," said head coach John McVay, "and there was a lot of interest. The Canadian government was very protective of the CFL and they didn't desire a lot of competition from American football."

Then Bassett dropped a bombshell that showed the kind of NFL stars he was ready to pursue. The move shocked the football establishment and helped the Wiffle establish its first toehold in its quest for credibility and respectability. It made everyone realize that John Bassett, and this new league, meant business.

The negative mood that everyone seemed to hold about the Wiffle shifted toward positive. Everyone, from NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle in his office in New York City to the armchair quarterback in Oakland, sat up to take notice. It had all started in February. Player agent Ed Keating met with one of his associates at the Pat Joyce Tavern in Cleveland. The associate wanted to know how much money it would

take for Keating's three biggest clients—running backs Larry Csonka and Jim Kiick and wide receiver Paul Warfield of the Miami Dolphins—to sign with the WFL. Keating worked on some figures on a napkin, and then handed it to the associate. The number on the napkin was $2.7-million.

"You're kidding!" the associate exclaimed, figuring three stars of their magnitude would command a lot more money. But Dolphins' owner Joe Robbie was paying each of his three biggest stars only around $65,000 a year. Everybody knew Robbie was cheap, but they couldn't believe just how cheap.

Word of Keating's figure filtered down to Bassett, who was one of the league's few financially solvent owners, and probably the only one who could afford to sign three players of such stature. He called Keating to ask if he was serious about the price tag. The agent replied that he was. Bassett was ready to do business.

Late in March, Keating and his three clients flew to Toronto to meet with Bassett, Cahill, Herb Solway, who was the team's Chairman of the Board, and Bassett's attorney. At the negotiating sessions, Keating presented Bassett with his clients' salary demands. Csonka was asking for $1.4-million over three years, Kiick $700,000 and Warfield $900,000. The entire package would cost Bassett $3 million, plus a one-million dollar signing bonus.

The pact was a guaranteed, personal-services contract, so the trio would be paid even if the WFL did not survive its first season.

The two sides quibbled over terms all morning and into early afternoon. Keating suddenly brought the negotiations to a screeching halt by saying, "It doesn't look like this is going to work out." Solway and Bassett retired to another room for a few minutes. Bassett told Solway he thought the Northmen would lose their prospects if they kept quibbling. He also said that the signings could make both the club and the league. Solway agreed. As they reentered the sitting room Bassett said simply, "O.K. We understand your position. You have a deal."

Keating and his clients then contacted Robbie and Miami head coach and general manager Don Shula. Csonka told his coach that they would sign with Toronto unless they were offered more money. Robbie refused to either negotiate over the phone or fly to Toronto to talk contract. The Dolphins' owner had assumed his players were going to Toronto to simply listen to an offer.

"I didn't expect them to be . . . held for ransom," said Robbie.

A short time later, Csonka, Kiick and Warfield signed with Toronto, their contracts to take effect for the 1975 season. Each had his own reasons for jumping to the new league.

"Certainly, the financial security is very important to me and my family," said Warfield, "I want to get into TV and radio broadcasting when I'm through playing football. I'll have that opportunity now. Mr. Bassett owns one of Toronto's biggest TV stations."

"I have a lot of pride," said Kiick, who was not pleased with his back-up role in Miami to Mercury Morris, "and I want to play a lot of football. I feel I can contribute to any football league. It gives us a great deal of satisfaction to know that we are pioneers in a way, that with us joining the new league, it might open the way for other ballplayers to join in, too."

"I have a tremendous amount of confidence in the WFL," said Csonka, who was in the definite minority.

It was "the deal that astonished sports," according to *Time* magazine. Suddenly, thanks to Bassett, the league had gained visibility. It now had "name" players, gate attractions to draw both interest and fans.

Marc Lalonde called the signing of "The Big Three" a squeeze play, and stressed that he would introduce his legislation before the House of Commons recessed on April 10th. Gary Davidson then threatened that if the legislation was enacted, he would urge his WFL teams to raid the CFL for players. Jake Gaudaur responded by calling that blackmail.

The bill to bar foreign football leagues, specifically the WFL, from entering Canada was introduced and passed on its first reading 118-92. It also passed a second reading.

By the first week of May, Bassett realized he couldn't fight city hall, or in this case the entire Canadian federal government, and hope to win. "It became apparent that it was going to be tough for us to conduct business in Toronto," said John McVay.

Bassett announced he was moving to Memphis, Tennessee, and added that he hoped that the people of Toronto would remember that it was Lalonde who had denied them the chance to see "superior football." Bassett did not hide his displeasure in being kicked out of his own country. "There will be World Football League teams operating in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal next year," he said bitterly. "After what they did to me, it's total war."

"The Mounties chased us to the border," joked McVay.

Now, earlier in the year, when Steve Arnold had poked around trying to drum up business for his proposed Memphis franchise, Mayor Wyeth Chandler

had indicated he would do everything in his power to keep a WFL franchise out of his city. At the time the city still had high hopes of attracting an NFL franchise. But when the NFL spurned the city when it selected its expansion teams for 1976, Memphis changed its tune.

But not everyone was on board the Bassett Express. Some city leaders and grassroots fans still voiced pro-NFL sentiments. When the Memphis City Commission voted 3-1 to grant Bassett a long-term lease on 50,000-seat Memorial Stadium, John Malmo, the board member who cast the dissenting vote, said, "Today we bought an Egyptian goose for the zoo, and maybe we bought a Canadian goose for the stadium. But now that it's here, I'll help it fly."

"The city has been great to us," said Bassett, "They've allowed us to play in one of the country's most magnificent stadiums. The Chamber of Commerce has given luncheons and dinners and done mailings for us. The city has done everything for us. This is a Memphis club now.

"When we came in here, we were told we wouldn't have a chance to televise our games because all three channels here are obligated to networks. But we've cracked two of the three, one with our games and one with the WFL Game of the Week. And we've got a radio network of about 40 stations in Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri and Louisiana."

"The city of Memphis welcomed us with open arms," added McVay, "it's a great city for a football team. The community, the media, they came on board in a hurry."

On May 7th, the Northmen franchise officially moved to Memphis. For an owner in a league known for its creativity, Bassett showed a remarkable lack of it by renaming his *North*men the *South*men. Some fans and members of the press referred to the team as the Grizzlies, which was the team's logo. The 1974 Memphis media guide included both nicknames, calling the team "Southmen" on one page and "Grizzlies" the next. It was quite confusing at times, but in the wacky, zany world of the WFL, it all made perfect sense. Most people would wind up preferring Grizzlies, and that's how the team was most commonly known in 1975.

Because of his reputation and financial reserves, Bassett was able to sign quite a lot of top-flight talent. He acquired defensive lineman Lucious Selmon, brother of NFL stars Lee Roy and Dewey Selmon, the fourth big name collegian to sign with the WFL. Bassett also wound up signing nine of his draft choices, including top prospect J. J. Jennings from Rutgers.

Many of his players and coaches and other league officials considered Bassett the class of the league.

"Top shelf all the way," Jennings recalled when describing the Memphis organization, "It was first class all the way. Even the players who had NFL experience said that the Southmen operation was first class, a sound outfit. With all the problems in the WFL we had first class travel, hotels, everything.

"He [*Bassett*] was a great guy," J.J. told the website wflnation.com recently, "Very personable. He was in with the players all the time talking to us and everything else. He was a great owner. You know we had everything a team needed. We didn't lack for anything."

"John Bassett was willing to spend the money to get the players," said John McVay, "He ran a world class operation."

"John Bassett was class," added Ed Marshall, "He didn't spare a penny, whatever Memphis needed, they got. He went out and got the media interested in the team and the community."

The Memphis Mafia

Elvis Presley regularly attended Southmen games. Before one game, country singer Charlie Rich stumbled through *The Star-Spangled Banner* and returned to his seat next to Presley. Elvis laughed and said, "That's a tough song, ain't it?" To which Rich replied, "It ain't no *Behind Closed Doors*."

"The Memphis Southmen were a veteran team," described John McVay, "Wally Highsmith, our tackle, had played in the NFL and CFL, and Dick Thornton also had experience; Ed Marshall—those guys had played a lot of football before they came to Memphis. We also had a great staff. Bob Gibson, who was our backfield coach, did a great job; Joe Eaglowski, Jay Fry, who had coached in Canada and had success there, Jim Rountree, who had played and coached in the CFL; and Joe Galat, who coached all over the U.S. Our running game was terrific. J.J. Jennings was a great back, he came from the East, Rutgers, and he fit beautifully into what we were doing on offense. John Harvey was a superstar in Canada, great speed, great moves. Willie Spencer had played high school football in my hometown and in Canada. He was a great big, fierce, strong running back. Paul Miles had played at Bowling Green University, and Gibson did a great job with them."

Memphis also signed veteran quarterback John Huarte, who was best remembered for winning the

Heisman Trophy in 1964, being the Jets' second-round draft choice after Joe Namath in 1965, and for not doing a whole heckuva lot in the NFL except carry a clipboard. While Namath ran the Jets' offense in '65, Huarte spent the season on the taxi squad. New York then shipped Huarte off to Boston where he played 14 games but all in mop-up duty to Babe Parilli, completing 5 of 11 passes.

After another year as Parilli's understudy, he was released and hooked on with the Eagles. He spent another season, 1967, on the cab squad and then played only two games for the Eagles in '68, throwing 15 passes and completing 7. In September of '69, Huarte was shipped off to Minnesota, who promptly cut him. The Chiefs then signed him and Huarte spent yet another season on the taxi squad (He drove more taxis than Alex Rieger!!).

Huarte did manage to hang on with the Chiefs for three seasons, but played only four games and tried just 13 passes. Kansas City then sold him on waivers to the Bears, who promptly—you guessed it—released him. Huarte sat out the '73 season and then signed on with the Southmen, a typical WFL player who had been kicked around by the NFL and had never gotten a real chance at success. Huarte had a curious sidearm delivery that reminded people of a submarine pitcher in baseball, but at least now he would have a shot at using the delivery.

While Bassett had the reserves to field and promote a competitive team, he was also enough of a realist to know that his team and the league had only taken baby steps so far, and that it was totally possible that rough times were ahead.

"We budgeted ourselves to lose $800,000 this year," he conceded, "Anything between $800,000 and a million and we're in our budget. Anything over that and I'm going to be unhappy."

Bassett figured it would take about three years to begin turning a profit, but he was concerned about the other owners he was beginning this journey with.

"You know," he said, "I could have the best franchise in the world, with the best organization, the best players and all that, but if the 11 other clubs aren't doing their share, it doesn't mean a thing."

This type of comment showed Bassett as being a refreshing change from the normal tight-lipped owners and officials running the WFL: he was always uncommonly open and honest when he spoke about the chances of the WFL succeeding. He told Kenneth Denlinger of *The Washington Post* , "If you want to look at the WFL optimistically, you can make a hell of a story. If you want to look at the situation pessimistically, you can make a hell of a story. If you want to look at things realistically, you've got a problem."

When asked about the situation in Detroit, Bassett responded, "I hear 33 people each put 15 cents in to buy a team. I don't know if they have any money up there!"

Later he told Skip Myslenski of Knight Newspapers, "Having a team in the WFL is kind of like having a blind date. Some guys end up marrying the girl they meet on a blind date; other guys go to the door, say they're sick and leave. Who knows?"

Bassett's Southmen opened the season at home against Detroit.

"We were like kids," said Ed Marshall, referring to the opener, "Looking forward to it. Butterflies in the stomach, couldn't wait to get outside, first game, first pro game in Memphis."

For that first pro game in Memphis, there were pregame thunderstorms and power outages to some of the light towers, but there were also 30,122 people in the stands.

"When we first came to Memphis, we saw all these 'Believe in Memphis' signs, but I wasn't too sure everyone in this city really believed," said Bassett, "Well, Memphis has proved something to itself tonight, the way it took this team to its heart."

The fans did seem to be on board. "This is a representative team," said one fan, "and we are 100 percent better off with the WFL that we would be with an NFL expansion team."

One of the fans in the stands was none other than Elvis, a big supporter of the Southmen. "I remember Elvis Presley was in the stands," said Jennings, "Something came out in the paper that he said I was his favorite player!"

Jennings scored the first touchdown in franchise history—"It was a trap play," Jennings recalled, "we ran that thing all year long, and I walked in untouched"—and the team built an 18-0 halftime lead and went on to win 34-15.

The Southmen played disciplined, almost error-free football. The offensive line did so well that it looked like they had played together for two years instead of only two weeks.

"It's easy when you have cats like that blocking," said the rookie Paul Miles, who scored the last two Memphis touchdowns, "My sister can go through those holes."

Defensive tackle John LeHeup made six tackles and recovered two fumbles, and was named the game's defensive MVP. "You've got to be lucky to recover fumbles," said LeHeup, a 6'2" 250 pounder who was called "Hercules" by his teammates, "Whenever you sack the

quarterback or pick up a fumble, someone else had to force it."

"I never had more fun in my life," said veteran co-captain Dick Thornton, "And I've never been higher for a game. The crowd? Indescribable, just indescribable. They came out to see an unknown product."

Memphis was quickly making itself into a known product, however, as they won their second straight by edging Portland, 16-8, before an even larger crowd than the opener, 31,088 people, at Memorial Stadium.

With their strong running attack, the Southmen didn't figure on passing much but John Huarte gave the fans an aerial show, anyway. "The game plan didn't call for any more passes than last week," said Huarte, "but the Portland defense just dictated pass."

Huarte threw 24 times and completed 15 for 197 yards and both Memphis touchdowns. The former Heisman Trophy winner was making the most of his opportunity with the Southmen. When asked if this performance was the best in his career, Huarte replied, "It's one of them."

"His experience and maturity were very evident," said John McVay.

Huarte had put Memphis on top in the first quarter on the team's very first possession with a beautiful 42-yard strike to wide receiver Jack Ettinger.

"I was so wide open that it occurred to me that I might drop the ball," said the rookie from Arkansas, "I'd much rather have 10 people around me than nobody."

After Portland managed to tie it up at 8-8 late in the third period, the Southmen got a break when Dave "Peanut" Thomas intercepted a Portland pass and then returned it 20 yards to the Storm 17. A couple plays later, Huarte spied Ed Marshall for the go-ahead score.

Portland reached the Memphis 39 in the waning seconds but the Southmen dumped Portland quarterback Greg Barton for a 10-yard loss and then LeHeup, who had managed to play most of the game on instinct alone after suffering a concussion early in the contest, recovered a fumble by Clem Turner at the end of a 17-yard run to ice it for Memphis.

The offense moved the ball well like they had done in Week One against Detroit, but this time a couple fumbles and some untimely penalties kept the team from scoring more than they did.

"Turnover and penalties really hurt," said McVay, "But I'm not disappointed, we won the game and we had guys play well. In a hard-hitting football game you're going to have fumbles and mistakes will be caused."

Although the team was 2-and-0 and had Huarte and rookie Danny White under center, that didn't stop them from pursuing other talented players. On July 23rd, as the team prepared to play Birmingham, it was announced that the Southmen had offered New Orleans' Saints quarterback Archie Manning a 3-year, $1-million future contract to jump to the WFL.

"I'm trying to weight loyalty to the Saints, to the fans and to the city," Archie said, "against the financial security for my family. It's a decision I hope the Saints won't make me have to make."

Saints' head coach John North said that Manning was seriously considering the offer.

The next night, the Southmen were in Birmingham to face the Americans. Both teams were undefeated, but an anticipated dramatic matchup turned into a rout as the Southmen got crushed by a score of 58-33.

"They beat us like government mules," said Ed Marshall, "They spanked us like little bitty babies. We were playing against an emotional crowd and a good football team, and that's a hard combination to beat."

"We started out behind and we finished up behind," said Huarte, who threw for 224 yards but was picked off four times. Memphis fumbled on their very first play from scrimmage and it was downhill from there, as Birmingham built leads of 21-3, 28-10, 36-18, and 42-25.

"I think I had said something in the newspaper that made the fans pretty mad at me," remembered Jennings, "They were screaming and throwing things and calling me names. We went down there and they kicked our ass."

"It all started when we gave up a cheap touchdown early," said McVay, "We had to play catch-up from there."

John Harvey was one of the few bright spots for the Southmen, rushing 16 times for 126 yards and a pair of scores. But the rest of the team could manage only 8 yards rushing.

In Week Four, Memphis got back on the winning track by whipping Southern California, 25-15, overcoming a 15-10 halftime deficit before 25,176 fans—some of whom could be heard chanting "We want Archie"—and pushing their record to 3-and-1.

Memphis held Southern California to just 79 yards rushing and shut out the Sun in the second half. Defensive end Tom Beckman, who had spent the Birmingham game stewing on the taxi squad, was a thorn in the side of the Sun all game, sacking quarterback Tony Adams once, intercepting another one of his passes, and knocking down yet another despite a bruised knee. "I was hurt and disappointed,"

Beckman said afterward, "I said a lot of nasty things while watching last week's game, but I worked my butt off this week, giving all I had in practice. It paid off."

"Beckman did some job," McVay had to admit, "He played well and he played hurt."

Willie Spencer scored two touchdowns and ran for 99 yards on 20 carries. Jennings added 71 yards and Harvey picked up 50 more as the Southmen shredded the Sun defense for 215 yards on the ground. "When those two elephants (Spencer and Jennings) get going, there's no stopping them," said McVay.

"Not too many people anywhere can run like Spencer," added Huarte.

Cornerback Dave "Spiderman" Boyd was especially happy about the win, saying he could now face his friends again. "After the Birmingham game, they wouldn't buy me a beer, they said I wasn't representing Lauderdale and Rosewood well," said Boyd, "I hope they're happy now."

Nobody in Memphis was happy a week later, as the Southmen got toasted by the Philadelphia Bell, 46-15.

King Corcoran threw four touchdown passes and his backup, Frank DiMaggio, added two more as the Bell built a 30-0 halftime lead on their way to their upset win.

"It's so unbelievable that we could play such a good last 30 minutes against Southern California last week and then for 60 minutes tonight don't play well at all," groused McVay.

After the debacle in Philly, and having surrendered 119 points in their last three games, the Southmen made some changes to their defensive lineup.

"We had to make some changes, we couldn't keep going like we had been on defense," said McVay. The changes led Randy Covitz of the *Press-Scimitar* to refer to the Memphis defense as the "New-Name Defense."

Defensive end Bill Stevenson, who spent training camp recovering from abdominal surgery, made his first start. So did linebacker Al Andrews, who was so new he still called his teammates by their numbers instead of their names. Cornerback Sonny Hicks also made his debut, and rookie linebacker Bob Lally from Cornell saw plenty of action. All the changes paid off as Memphis won its first game on the road by dismantling the Detroit Wheels, 37-7.

Stevenson, a 6'4" 273 pound rookie from Drake, registered three quarterback sacks and a fumble recovery. "We used a new defense—a 5-2—and that left one of the ends open. We were in there all night," said Stevenson, named the game's outstanding defensive player. Andrews, although admitting he was "uptight" early in the game, recorded six tackles and also recovered a fumble.

Jennings rushed for 113 yards and Spencer added 53 more and two touchdowns.

Back home before 25,123 fans, Memphis rolled up 524 yards in offense and set a WFL record for a one-game point total in crushing The Hawaiians by the score of 60-8.

Huarte completed 14 of 21 passes for 264 yards and four touchdowns as the Southmen built a commanding 39-0 halftime lead. Huarte sat out the second half in what seemed like an act of mercy on the part of the Southmen. "I was completing them early and stayed with it," said Huarte afterward.

The defense did most of the scoring in the second half, as Thornton and Bobby Majors both returned interceptions for long touchdowns. They also shut down The Hawaiians offense, intercepting a total of 4 passes and registering seven sacks. Memphis' relentless pass rush harassed Hawaiians' starter Norris Weese into a 6 of 22 passing nightmare.

A week later, in Orlando, Memphis, now 5-and-2, faced the first place Blazers, who were 6-and-1 and leading the East. The Southmen chewed up Jack Pardee's tough defense for 251 yards rushing, 137 of it by Harvey, and won 26-18.

"This was by far the best game Harvey has played," said McVay.

Memphis controlled the ball for most of the second half, keeping the ball for nine minutes during one drive and eight minutes during another. "That was the game, that drive," said McVay, referring to the second march, a 95-yard, 15-play thing of beauty, "It showed our offensive dominance and cemented the game."

Huarte gave credit to his offensive line. "Guys like Justin Canale and Ralph Hill were knocking people out all over the place," said the veteran quarterback.

Florida tried to come back late on the arm of veteran quarterback Bob Davis. "They were hurting us with the second man coming out of the backfield, we just had no coverage on him," said Thornton, "But on that last drive, eight and 10-yarders weren't going to beat us. We wanted to bend, not break." Thornton saw to that by intercepting a last gasp pass to seal the win.

Four days after facing Florida, the Southmen flew into Jacksonville to face the Sharks. "We're happy to win a tough ball game on the road against a good team and with them having seven days to get ready and us four," said McVay of the team's 16-13 win in Jacksonville, the team's fourth victory in a row and seventh in nine games, "It was physically tough. There will be some guys come out with bruised heads."

"We came up with the big play at the right time," added cornerback Dave "Peanut" Thomas, who came up a big play—an interception—late in the game to seal the victory.

Memphis needed some big plays because the Jacksonville defense hounded Huarte, who was sacked five times. "They're a good defensive team," said McVay, "We had to fight for our lives."

The game, played before 22,169 fans in a hot and humid Gator Bowl, took its toll on the Southmen. "Everybody was a little tired," said Spencer, "There wasn't any breeze down there. A couple of players needed oxygen."

Jacksonville scored to take the lead 13-8 with 11:24 left in the game. But Memphis took the ensuing kickoff and swept 68 yards. Harvey caught a pass for 22 yards and ran for 21 more, and then Huarte connected with Roger Wallace for 17 yards to the Sharks' four-yard-line. Spencer trotted over from a yard out with 8:24 remaining to put the Southmen up for good, 16-13. Two late Jacksonville drives were stopped by interceptions, first by Seth Miller and then Thomas.

Just five days after edging the Sharks, Memphis faced Houston at home. When Roger Wallace took the field, he looked up into the stands and was taken aback when he saw 35,000 empty seats in Memorial Stadium.

"Where are all the people?" Wallace said, and then added in reference to Memphis' reputation as the capital of Mid-South Professional Wrestling, "Are they having wrestling matches tonight?"

The fans might have been watching Jerry "The King" Lawler and his pals, or they also might have just taken Houston, with a record of 3-5-1, lightly in anticipation of a rematch just four days away with undefeated Birmingham. Whatever the reason, only 15,291 fans showed up, the smallest crowd of the season. Those that came saw Memphis bury the Texans, 45-0 to improve its record to 8-and-2.

"The natural thing was to look to Birmingham," said McVay, "but we worked hard in preparing for Houston and it showed."

The Southmen, sporting the league's best offense, found little resistance from the Texans, and at one point scored on five of six possessions. Memphis built a 31-0 halftime lead, and for the second time in the season, Huarte did so well in the first half that he sat out the second.

"When you have the time the line gave me, you can throw to anybody, anywhere," said Huarte, who completed 8 of 16 passes for 113 yards and three touchdowns. Gary Moore wrote in the *Commercial Appeal* that Huarte had such excellent protection that he "had enough time in the pocket to count the number of fans in the end zone seats."

Linebacker Emery Hicks, who filled in at defensive tackle in place of the injured John LeHeup and Fest Cotton, got the game ball. He made one of the big plays of the game by stealing the ball right out of Houston quarterback David Mays' hands.

The offense gained 422 total yards while the Texans managed only 157. That's because the defense was determined to pitch a shutout, its first one of the season. "We talked about getting that shutout during the whole second half," said Thornton, "It's a pride factor."

"Our defense really has something to prove," added Stevenson.

Offensive lineman Chris Morris, who had signed a "future contract" with Memphis for 1975, was cut by the Browns, apparently because of the contract, and joined the Southmen a year early.

Four days after whipping Houston, Memphis hosted Birmingham in a rematch of their earlier 58-33 thrashing at the hands of the Americans. This time the shoe was on the other foot.

"It was real quiet in the locker room and in pregame warm-ups," said McVay, who termed the win the biggest of his career, "You could tell before the game that something big was going to happen."

Something big did happen. Huarte hurled three touchdown passes and Memphis rushed for 220 yards as the Southmen knocked the Americans from the unbeaten ranks and pulled to within a game of Birmingham in the Central Division. Memphis raced out to a 22-0 lead and never looked back in winning 46-7 before 30,677 fans.

"We were obviously fired up," said McVay.

Ed Marshall, who caught three touchdown passes and added two action points, said, "We were a better team than when we played them the last time. We just weren't together then, but tonight we were."

"Birmingham can score four touchdowns a quarter if you don't go out there and put the defense to them," said McVay, "Our pass defense has improved tremendously and we're getting a much better pass rush. I don't think it's for me to say if we're the best team in the league right now. I think that will be determined as the season goes on."

The Memphis pass defense pressured Birmingham into completing less than 50% of their passes and throwing four interceptions.

"That loss at Birmingham has been a thorn in our side all year," said Lally, "People still don't appreciate

how good we were during the last few weeks. Tonight, we proved we're a solid contender if not the best team in the WFL."

When Cahill entered McVay's office to congratulate him, the coach told his GM, "Sorry, boss, we tried to make it exciting but it got away from us."

A week later, the Southmen tried to make another game exciting but it got away from them, too. This time it was Chicago who couldn't keep up with Memphis and lost, 25-7, as the Southmen won their seventh in a row and improved their record to 10-and-2.

The Fire couldn't stop anybody, not even J.J. Jennings, who had spent the afternoon in a sickbed battling a 102-degree temperature. "My whole head, throat and sinuses are congested," Jennings said afterward, "I felt weak during the game and had to keep coming out for rests."

Between trips to the sidelines, Jennings recorded his fourth 100-yard rushing game of the season, his 132 yards giving him a league leading 879 for the season.

"No one was there to stop me," said Jennings, who McVay stated "outdid himself. He had a 102-degree temperature during the day yet came back to play so well."

The Southmen defense was unyielding again, giving up a touchdown or less for the sixth time in the last seven games. "We just made up our minds we were going to help the offense do the job," said defensive end Cecil Pryor, who sacked quarterback Virgil Carter twice and generally harassed him all game long, "If we don't stop the other teams, no matter how many points our offense scores, we won't win."

The defense was again at the top of its game in Week Thirteen, smothering the Shreveport Steamer all night long and surrendering only a field goal as Memphis won its eighth game in a row, 17-3 on a chilly, misty night in Shreveport. The defense held the Steamer, the former Houston Texans who had recently been relocated by the league to Louisiana, to just 13 first downs and 230 yards in total offense, and forced three turnovers.

"At first we were messing up on trying to stop them," said Bill Stevenson, referring to the Steamer's use of the Veer offense, "But then each guy had an assignment. The ends had the quarterback; the backs had the pitch; and the tackles took the guy diving into the line."

Danny White, subbing for an injured Huarte, made his first start of the season and earned a game ball with a 16 of 29 for 203 yards and one touchdown performance. "Not only did Danny throw real well," offered McVay, "but he had great poise while performing well in a pressure situation."

The game would not have been as close as it was if a clipping penalty hadn't stalled one Memphis drive and a dropped pass hadn't ended another.

"We kept stopping ourselves, and I told them at the half to have patience, things just weren't falling," said McVay.

On October 2nd, Memphis defeated Jacksonville, 47-19 and J.J. Jennings became the first WFL runner to go over 1,000 yards for the season. "I have a picture of me with the linemen, holding the ball," recalled Jennings, "That was a big game for me. Tommy Reamon of the Blazers won the rushing title but I carried the ball less and had a higher average-yards-per-carry."

Jennings was not the only star that night for the Southmen. Willie Spencer rushed for 141 yards and scored five touchdowns. Bill Stevenson recovered two fumbles and intercepted a pass. John LeHeup recorded nine tackles and a quarterback sack. Safety Seth Miller picked off three passes, giving him a league-leading eight for the season.

There was more good news when the team learned that The Hawaiians had upset Birmingham, 14-8, putting the Southmen all alone in first place in the Central Division with a record of 12-and-2. Birmingham fell a game back at 11-and-3.

The evening was spoiled somewhat by the poor turnout at the gate. Only 15,016 people—Memphis' smallest crowd of the season—were on hand. The players seemed a bit disillusioned by the size of the crowd, and the front office had to be concerned about the attendance, which was hovering around 22,000 per seven home games.

"I think the team is going great, but the crowds aren't doing us any good," said Stevenson, "We had 15,000 and we're 12-2. It's ridiculous. They said if you win in Memphis, they'll come to see you. But I can't see anybody in the league doing better than us.

"Everybody's mad about it right now," Stevenson went on, "There's no use having a home field when it's like this. I don't know what's wrong with the people. You run out on the field figuring there will be a big crowd and it's a letdown. Something's got to change to get the people out."

"I think it's disappointing," said Leo Cahill, "I don't know what to attribute it to. You can say Jacksonville had a credibility gap because of its problems. And it was a cool night and the people have to adjust.

"But the sum and the substance of the thing is that we are winning," Cahill continued, "The WFL is

apparent to everyone in the United States. Everyone knows Memphis, Tennessee, has the best team in the WFL. It's almost coincidental that the people in Memphis don't know it."

The Southmen maintained a one-game lead in the Central Division by holding off Charlotte, 27-23, the home opener for the newly transplanted and newly renamed New York Stars. Defensive back Peanut Thomas picked off a pass intended for wide receiver Al Barnes on his own 12-yard line late in the game to finally clinch the victory for the Southmen, their tenth in a row.

"Barnes is their best wide receiver," said Thomas, "It wasn't that bad a pass, and I just had perfect position on him."

Danny White tossed two fourth-quarter touchdown passes to Ed Marshall, and Memphis got a combined 213 yards rushing from Willie Spencer and J.J. Jennings.

That same day, Bassett, attending the game in Charlotte, had to deny rumors that he was considering moving the Southmen to Jacksonville, of all places.

"Nobody from Jacksonville ever contacted me," said the owner, "I haven't even been in Jacksonville. I was in Jacksonville in 1960."

Bassett added that he has made no overtures to Jacksonville either, and said he believed his name became entangled with a possible move to Jacksonville because as a member of the league executive committee he had been working to find new ownership for the Jacksonville Sharks.

Jacksonville's game that night had been postponed, and they would soon be folded by the league. Despite the team's sagging attendance figures, it's doubtful that a savvy businessman like Bassett would even consider moving his team into a city where another team had just failed.

The Southmen returned home to face the Eastern Division-leading Florida Blazers. Although it was a battle of division leaders, the game drew only 15,334 fans.

Memphis captured a 25-15 victory over Florida, the team's 11th win in a row. John Huarte, returning after missing three games due to an injury, hit on 10 of 18 passes for 212 yards and a touchdown.

The victory was dampened by an injury to running back Willie Spencer. Going into the game, Spencer was the sixth-best rusher in the league. In the third quarter, Spencer dove into the end zone to give Memphis an 18-0 lead, but hurt his knee on the play and in all likelihood was out for the rest of the season.

"I hate to see people get hurt," said Huarte, "Willie is probably the best thoroughbred back I've seen since I've been in pro ball. A big back like that just makes your mouth water."

Fortunately, the Southmen were still loaded at running back with J. J. Jennings, John Harvey, and Paul Miles, but with Spencer out, they would now have to rely more on their passing game.

Peanut Thomas came up with another big interception, this one a pick of a Bob Davis pass in the end zone in the fourth quarter.

Riding an 11-game winning streak and in first place in the WFL's Central Division, the Southmen had become the toast of the town. Local celebrities like Elvis, Charlie Rich and Isaac Hayes attended games. The Southmen had become celebrities in their own right, and were enjoying living in Memphis and the nightlife and entertainment it offered. "I never met more entertainers in my life," remembered Jennings, "Paul Miles [*now a fine blues artist in his own right*] had a condo, and I would go there and Isaac Hayes was there all the time with his bodyguards. We would be all around, partying, and having a good time. I used to live on Graceland Avenue just down the street from Elvis Presley; some people still have a hard time believing that one."

Some people found it hard to believe when the Southmen's 11-game winning streak came crashing to the ground. Bob Etter's 39-yard last second field goal try drifted off to the right to seal a 26-25 upset loss to the suddenly resurgent Portland Storm.

Portland's surprisingly effective passing attack kept the Southmen on their heels for most of the night. But an 82-yard kickoff return for a touchdown by Tim Beamer sparked Memphis.

"I stayed behind the wedge and it just opened up," said Beamer, "I saw Emery Hicks out front and slowed up for him to get the last block and then it was all over. We needed it. It sparked the team."

A Sonny Hicks interception set up a 79-yard scoring drive that ended with a 2-yard touchdown run by J.J. Jennings. A 32-yard field goal by Etter at the start of the third quarter put Memphis up, 17-15.

But the Storm forged ahead again, and when Portland widened their lead to 26-17 with 1:33 left, John McVay inserted Danny White in the lineup. "At that point, we put White in there to see if he could get us going," said McVay, "He did a good job under pressure."

White engineered a 7-play, 68-yard drive that he capped with a 2-yard scoring pass to Ed Marshall. White then connected with Roger Wallace on a crossing pattern for the action point to make it 26-25 with 43 seconds left.

Memphis tried an on-side kick. Portland's Paul Guidry mishandled it and Peanut Thomas recovered

for the Southmen. White then hit four of five passes to set up Etter with four seconds left. He thought it was good and so did holder Dick Thornton, but the ball drifted off to the right and Memphis would have a wait a week to clinch the division title.

"I knew I had the distance," said a dejected Etter, "I thought it was going to be good until I looked up."

With Willie Spencer still out with an injury, the Southmen were forced to rely more on their aerial attack when they faced The Hawaiians on October 30th. John Huarte showed that the Southmen passing game was just as potent as their running attack, as he tossed three touchdown passes, two to tight end Gary Shirk and another to wide receiver Roger Wallace.

The Hawaiians were also in a very charitable mood, helping the Memphis cause by fumbling the ball away three times. Tim Beamer recovered a Hawaiians fumble in the end zone just 10 seconds into the game and Memphis was off and running.

Linebacker Tom Beutler recovered a fumbled kick in the second quarter and that set up Huarte's 27-yard scoring pass to Shirk. On their next series, The Hawaiians tried a bit of trickeration with a fake punt. But the Southmen smelled it out and stopped the play for a loss. Two plays later Huarte connected with Wallace for 51 yards and another score.

The game wasn't as close as the score indicated as The Hawaiians scored their final touchdown with five seconds left.

John McVay was happy there was no let down after the loss to Portland, especially playing in an exotic paradise like Honolulu.

"We came here to play football . . . we didn't want to lose two on the road," the coach said, "I turned them loose for a couple days in Waikiki Beach and told them to come in here and play football. They did."

A week later, the Southmen returned home to face Chicago. They won their 16th game of the season by whipping the Fire, 49-24 before only 14,085 fans, the smallest crowd of the season.

There was more bad news when it was learned that wide receiver Roger Wallace, who had caught 40 passes for 674 yards and 5 touchdowns, and cornerback Merl Code both suffered season-ending knee injuries, joining Willie Spencer on the sidelines.

"When I came down, my knee crashed into his (Ralph Anderson's) helmet," Wallace said of the leaping catch that led to his injury, "Never, ever have I been hurt before."

"I'd rather it be me hurt than Roger, that's exactly how I feel," Danny White said of his roommate and close friend, "This spoils the whole night. He was down after dropping one earlier and I wanted to build his confidence up. After he went out, I couldn't think straight in the huddle. I just wanted to go to the bench and see how he was."

The Fire, who lost their 10th in a row in a season that had begun with a lot of promise, put up a fight for awhile and bravely tried to make a game of it. At one point they led 16-10, and in the fourth quarter trailed by only 33-24. But Bill Stevenson blocked a Chicago field goal try, and Memphis struck for two late touchdowns, the second one the most entertaining play of the night.

With 13 seconds left in the game, with the ball at the Chicago 6-yard line, White handed off to 245-pound offensive guard Bracey Bonham, who chugged his way into the end zone.

"Carrying that football, it's a lineman's dream, man," said Bonham, savoring the rare moment.

John Bassett stepped up to congratulate Bonham on his touchdown, and couldn't resist making a joke. "Csonka called," the owner said with a smile, "he said he saw you on TV and isn't coming."

J.J. Jennings probably didn't care if Csonka was coming or not. That's because in the season finale against Charlotte, he rushed for 99 yards to give him 1,524 yards for the season and also earned himself a nice little check for $1,000 by being named the team's MVP.

"I remember all the people in training camp and how all the positions were up for grabs," recalled Jennings, "The backs were running the 40s and everybody had better times than me. I hope I proved that you don't always need speed if you know where to run.

"This is the greatest honor of my life," Jennings went on, "But it's an award for the whole team, you know how close everybody on the team is. When the season started, something like this was the farthest thing from my mind. I didn't have a good preseason and I have to thank the coaches for going with me."

The Southmen won the game, 28-22, their league best 17th win of the season. But the long season continued to take its toll on the Memphis lineup. Starting linebackers Bob Lally and Jake Burkhardt were both sidelined, as well as another linebacker, Tom Beutler, defensive tackle Lucious Selmon and wide receiver Tim Beamer. The good news was that all would be ready for the playoffs, but the hurts had McVay scrambling to continually overhaul his lineup.

"We were running out of bodies," said McVay, "We had a second-string tight end—Dick Bumpas—playing linebacker and Gary Powell was playing both ways as a receiver and defensive back."

Memphis had won 14 of their last 15 games to finish the regular season with a league-best 17-and-3 record and the Central Division championship. They topped the league by scoring 629 points and 79 touchdowns. Their rushing game resembled the best ground attack since George Patton's Fifth Army, as it gained a league-high 3,852 yards. J.J. Jennings (1,524 yards), John Harvey (945) and Willie Spencer (788) all finished among the WFL's top ten rushers. Three members of their offensive line—Wally Highsmith, Ron Mikolajcyzk, and Ralph Hill—made the All-League team selected by the players and coaches. Besides the offensive fireworks, the Southmen also registered 57 quarterback sacks and had a turnover ratio of a +23.

Thanks to their high-powered offense and the ownership and leadership of John Bassett, the Southmen had been one of the league's most solid franchises.

But like Bassett had predicted at the beginning of the season, "I could have the best franchise in the world, with the best organization, the best players and all that, but if the 11 other clubs aren't doing their share, it doesn't mean a thing."

Unfortunately, his analysis turned out to be all too true.

CHAPTER 12

A Worm in the Big Apple

The New York Stars, 1974

"The quarterbacks had to carry flashlights so they could read the plays on their arm bands."

—Defensive Tackle GREG LENS, in describing Downing Stadium

The New York Stars franchise began life in late 1973 in Boston as the Boston Bulldogs, which had also been the name of Boston's first professional football franchise in 1929. Like so many things associated with the early stages of the WFL, that name didn't last long. In October it was shortened to Bulls.

The franchise was owned by Howard Baldwin, president and minority owner of the New England Whalers of the World Hockey Association. Like most of the other original WFL owners, he didn't have to pay a franchise fee because of his close ties to WFL founder and Commissioner Gary Davidson.

Baldwin hired Steelers' assistant coach Vito "Babe" Parilli, who had been a quarterback for the Boston Patriots for eight years in the AFL, as head coach.

"I talked to Howard Baldwin," recalled Parilli, "Howard was the president of the New England Whalers of the WHA. He thought that bringing me to the Boston area would create some excitement for the team and the WFL."

"It's nice to be back in Boston," Parilli said at the time, "I really missed it. I have been bubbling with enthusiasm over what I've seen of the Boston franchise."

Parilli was able to convince ex-Jet receiver and teammate George Sauer to come out of retirement and sign with the team.

"I had played with George," Parilli said in an interview with a WFL web site, "Out of the clear blue, George retired on his own, right in the prime of his career. He was a sort of an introvert and he wanted to go his own way. When I approached him he seemed interested to come out of retirement but there was a problem because he still belonged to the New York Jets. I had worked out a deal with Webb Ewbank, something most teams don't do, especially between rival leagues, to allow us to get George. I explained that it would be in Weeb's best interest to allow us to sign George and when we did he didn't contest the contract. I let George know that we had signed Gerry Philbin and John Elliott, two holdovers from the '69 Super Bowl team, to contracts and he was interested in making the move."

"Coaching at Oberlin College rekindled the old football sparks," Sauer said at the time, referring to being an assistant coach at the college, "Something inside me intensified. I wanted to play football again. Then I started hearing about the formation of the WFL and things fell together."

While Parilli was able to attract some veteran players, Baldwin was unable to attract more investors. Baldwin contacted Bob Keating, manager of Schaeffer Stadium in Foxboro and general manager of the ACFL's New England Colonials. Keating in turn got Baldwin in touch with millionaire Henry Vickers. Baldwin told Vickers his price tag was $700,000, but Vickers was not interested.

On top of being unable to attract wealthy investors, Baldwin couldn't find a suitable place to play. Baldwin tried Schaeffer Stadium, Nickerson Field and Harvard Stadium, but couldn't reach an agreement with any of them.

Realizing he had no hope of putting together a viable product in Boston, Baldwin opted to merge with the WFL's as-yet-unnamed New York franchise on January 26th, 1974. That franchise was owned by Bob Schmertz, who was a developer and sports franchise owner. He was owner or part-owner of two NBA franchises. He ran the expansion Portland Trailblazers

during their first two years in the league, from 1970 through 1972, and then purchased the Boston Celtics in 1972. He was also the majority stockholder in the New England Whalers of the WHA (hence his connection with Baldwin and Davidson). Schmertz also founded Leisure Technology, a developer of retirement communities.

He had three New York-based limited business partners: Henry Fujawski, John Lander and Steven Cohen, who together made up the core of the team's ownership and who, like Baldwin, hadn't had to pay a franchise fee. The two teams had already worked together very closely in the draft. The merged team took the name New York Stars, the franchise's third name since it was founded.

"The decision was made," said Parilli, "I got a call from the owner of the New York team, Bob Schmertz. He owned the Boston Celtics of the NBA at that time. I think the league felt that the New York market needed a strong team and that we would be a better draw there. I didn't really know the real reason why, but I was concerned because I lived in Boston. Eventually, I flew down to New York, met with Bob, and he detailed the benefits of the move, financial and professional. I signed a three year contract."

"Bob Schmertz was a good guy," added Parilli, "I really liked Bob. Everything he did was first class."

The Stars put together a decent front office with Baldwin as President, Keating as General Manager, and Dusty Rhodes as Assistant General Manager.

No not the professional wrestler. This Dusty Rhodes was much better looking. "She was a young lady who probably knew more about football than Bob and Howard," said Parilli. After graduating from Penn State, she had worked for the Patriots in a variety of jobs, from the ticket office to the office of Director of Player Personnel. Rhodes then spent 14 months working for sports agent Bob Woolf, learning about sports in general and athletes in particular.

"Howard was a good guy," remembered Parilli, "He was a young, dedicated guy who was trying to do a good job. Bob Keating was learning the ropes, trying to do a good job. Dusty Rhodes was an exception to the rule. She had worked with sports agent Bob Woolf, and she could memorize all the clauses and concepts of all the players' contracts."

Finding a home field for the fledgling team proved just as difficult as it had been in Boston. Yankee Stadium was closed for renovation right after the Yankees finished the 1973 season in October; it would not reopen until 1976. Shea Stadium was fully booked as the Yankees shared the park with the Mets and the NFL's Jets. Roosevelt Stadium in New Jersey was in almost complete disrepair. The Stars were running out of options.

The Stars had only two other choices in the city proper: Downing Stadium, a 22,000-seat facility built during the Depression as a WPA Project on Randall's Island in the East River, or Baker Field, the 32,000-seat wooden stadium that served as the home of Columbia University's teams. The team couldn't come to terms with Columbia, so Downing Stadium was ultimately chosen.

Downing Stadium would turn out to be the albatross around the neck of the franchise. It may have been the worst facility in the league, which was indeed saying a lot. It was small, with only 27,000 seats, hardly a major-league facility, and had fallen into disrepair in recent years. A league official said that even if the Stars sold out every one of their home games, the team would still lose $1 million in 1974.

In an effort to spike local interest, Parilli signed a number of the old Super Bowl champion Jets including Sauer, who was coming out of retirement after three years, Randy Beverly, Sam Walton, and former All-Pro defensive linemen Gerry Philbin and John Elliott.

"They said to me that they had more fun with the Stars than the Jets," said Parilli of Philbin and Elliott, "They were the 'big dogs' of the team and the league. I knew them, they knew me. They really enjoyed it, they had a great time. Those guys were happy campers."

Philbin was all set to retire after a lost 1973 season. After nine solid years with the Jets, Philbin was traded to Kansas City. The Chiefs heard that Philbin might not report, so they dumped him off on the Eagles. He played 13 games in Philadelphia, but because of an injury and some personal problems, Philbin was thinking of quitting.

"All of a sudden, they (the WFL) made the big move to New York," said Philbin, "and I got interested. I needed money. Plain and simple.

"The WFL is giving more players and fans a crack at pro football," Philbin continued, "I'm all for that. It's given me an opportunity to play again. I feel at home with the Stars."

"It wasn't really money that made me leave the Jets," said Elliott, "They moved me from right defensive tackle after six years to the left defensive end without saying a word. Weeb [*Ewbank*] didn't like me one bit. When I signed with the Stars he traded me to the Oilers just as a parting shot."

Parilli also went after Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw, who he had coached in 1973. But after considering the offer, Bradshaw thought better of it and turned it down.

"I just didn't want to give up this team for one which I just didn't know would be there in two years," said Bradshaw, "Very simply, Pittsburgh is a fine town with a great football team and a great organization, and when you travel first class you want to continue first class."

Parilli added that loyalty was a factor in the decision.

"I tried to bring Terry Bradshaw to the New York Stars," said Parilli, "Bob Schmertz told me, 'offer him $750,000.' That was a lot of money in those days. In fact, he and his agent came up and we had dinner in the city. Mr. Rooney, I had coached with the Steelers for three years, sent one of his relatives down and he asked me, 'Are you really gonna steal all of our players?' I backed off. I respected Mr. Rooney too much and didn't want to raid his players."

Despite missing out on Bradshaw, Parilli thought he had a solid team.

"We had a good team," remembered Babe, "Our quarterbacks were Tom Sherman, Gary Danielson and Brian Dowling, all good NFL quarterbacks. Tom was a great competitor. He wasn't overly talented but he is the kind of guy who can get the job done. A good team leader, a real good team leader. Not a real big kid, but he was mobile and could run, a good field general. I thought he was the best of the three that the Stars had.

"Matt Herkenhoff. We signed him away from Kansas City. He was one of our top draft picks, and he was Kansas City's top pick. He played 13 years with the Chiefs after the 1974 season. Bob Kuziel was our center; he went on to play for the Redskins. Darrel Bunge, a kid out of Minnesota, was tough. Larry Butler. Bob Gladieux was a rough, tough football player. When you needed three or four yards, Bob was your man. He was a warrior, I liked Bob a lot. On the defense, we had Philbin and Elliott and they gave WFL quarterbacks a lot of pressure."

The WFL needed New York in order to have a presence in the largest U.S. media market.

Any new league must have a team, and a good one, in New York City. The old saying, "If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere" is just as true for sports as it is for any other kind of entertainment. This was just as true in 1974 as it is today. The wire services were based there, the three big TV networks had their headquarters there, and so did most of the advertising agencies that purchased commercial air time and made lucrative TV packages possible. A New York area franchise was able to keep a new league in view, although the early history of the AFL's Titans, the ABA's New Jersey Americans and the WHA's Raiders and Golden Blades made it clear that no new league was going to find it easy to "make it" in the big city. The Stars began to grow concerned that they might not "make it" when they were able to sell only something in the neighborhood of 5,500 and 8,000 season tickets.

The Stars went to Jacksonville for their opener and lost 14-7 in front of a league high crowd of 59,112 at the Gator Bowl.

"We shut Jacksonville out as far as the defense was concerned and still lost," grumbled Gerry Philbin. A goal line stand by the Sharks, during which Sherman missed a pass and Davey Richards was stopped on three straight plays, was a turning point. Sherman hit on only 15 of 34 passes for 202 yards and a touchdown to George Sauer, who had a solid debut with seven catches for 77 yards.

But most of the talk centered on the huge and unexpected crowd.

"That was really an eye opener," Parilli remembered, "We had close to 60,000 fans there, and for a new league that was something to remember."

A week later, the Stars' first home game against the Birmingham Americans attracted 17,943 New Yorkers. After leading 29-3 at halftime, the Stars were toppled by the efforts of Americans quarterback George Mira, who threw for three touchdowns and ran for another as Birmingham pulled out a 32-29 comeback win.

"The first home game was against my old friend Jack Gotta and the Birmingham Americans," recalled Babe Parilli, "I was with Jack in the Air Force, and I got him a tryout with the Cleveland Browns before he went up to Canada and became a star up there and a great coach. At halftime we had them 29-3, and I thought, 'Holy hell, I don't want to embarrass the guy.' That goes to show you that a game is never won till the final whistle blows. I thought we had that game locked up.

"There was a good crowd, and we had the people of New York behind us. We had George Sauer, John Elliott, Gerry Philbin and Greg Lens, all former Jets, and the Jets and Giants were losing, so there was a lot of excitement. In the game, George Mira threw a long pass, and our defensive back tripped over an official, and the ball went up over the lights and the safety lost it. I never saw the touchdown until Dennis Homan had it in the end zone."

"We put a good rush on them in the first half, but stayed back in the second half and they took us apart," offered Gerry Philbin.

Tom Sherman drove the Stars downfield in the last two minutes and got the team to the Birmingham 25. Pete Rajecki tried a field goal from there but the "Bootin' Teuton," as the German-born kicker was called, missed wide left with 36 seconds remaining.

"Don't blame Rajecki," Parilli said afterward, "He broke three ribs in the first half and still kicked two field goals. He was playing hurt."

After watching his team fall apart in the second half against Birmingham, Parilli benched cornerbacks Wendell Wilson and Charley Boston, released outside linebacker Ernie Richardson, and switched safeties James Sims and Steve Dennis to other positions.

Andy Huff, who rushed for 106 yards against Birmingham, missed the next game against Philadelphia due to a death in his family. Also on the shelf was another running back, Jim Ford, who had plowed for 71 yards against the Americans. But the Stars finally won their first game as rookie kicker Moses Lajterman, cut by both the Bell and the Stars in training camp but brought back due to Rajecki's broken ribs, kicked the winning field goal for a 17-15 win at Philadelphia.

This one's for Marcel . . .

Moses Lajterman's world had fallen apart on Nov. 14th, 1970, when his brother Marcel died with 74 other Marshall University football players, fans and crew members in a jet crash near Huntington, West Virginia. But out of the agony came a promise. "I was a soccer style field goal kicker then, just like Marcel, at Montclair State in New Jersey," Moses said, "and when he died, well, that's when I started working harder than I ever had before. I worked harder because Marcel didn't get his chance at pro football. I promised Marcel I would make it for him." Moses kept his promise when four minutes into the fourth quarter on July 25th, he kicked a 40-yard field goal, scoring for the first time in his pro career and giving the Stars a 17-15 win over the Bell. "You know, I always thought about making it in pro football, but I didn't think I was good enough," said Lajterman, "I always hoped Marcel would make it. He had such tremendous talent and potential. I always pulled for him to be the one to get into the pros." Moses was one of four brothers who grew up in Argentina, and he always rooted for his older brother. "At one time it cost me my job," he said, "You see, we moved around a little bit in New Jersey and when we went to Lyndhurst, Marcel decided he wanted to stay in Passaic. So, I was Lyndhurst's kicker. When it got to be the time to play Passaic, I happened to mention to our coach how great it would be to kick against my brother. When the coach found out what I was talking about, he told me Marcel had to go to Lyndhurst too. So Marcel transferred and I was out of a kicking job." Marcel played only nine games at Marshall before the fatal crash, but his credentials included a 50-yard field goal. "He was really good," said Moses, "He was the biggest of all of us, and you could tell it in his kicking. He had a really strong leg. Every time I go onto a football field, I think of him. It's hard to explain, but I talk to Marcel when I go out there. I always see his face in my mind and sort of imagine what he would be doing. He was something great to me. I loved Marcel."

"Earlier in the year I cut him from the squad," said Parilli, "But Rajecki hurt his ribs and I had to call Lajtermann a day or two ago. He'll stay with us now."

The snap for Lajterman wasn't the best, but then it was offensive guard Larry Butler, filling in for an injured Bob Kuziel, who delivered it. Pretty or not, the snap got the job done. "It was my first snap of the season," said Butler, "I was confident that I could get it through, but it was a real bad snap."

"It was a bad snap, but it went through. It was nice to get this one against them," said Lajtermann, who was cut by the Bell after a two-day tryout, "I knew I was better than the kicker they had around but they never gave me a shot."

The Stars and Bell performed in front of the largest WFL crowd, with 64,179 on hand. It later came out, however, that most of the tickets were sold at large discounts or were given away to make the league appear more successful than it was.

"Grace Kelly's brother, Jack Kelly, was one of the original owners of the Philadelphia Bell," recalled Babe Parilli, "He picked me and the coaches up and took us out to dinner at Brookline and he talked about the WFL and the excitement around the city.

"That game came down to a field goal. We had the game won, and King Corcoran completed a pass, and the clock should have expired but it didn't so the officials gave the Bell a chance to kick a field goal. I was pretty upset with the officials on that call. The Bell field goal kicker couldn't find his shoe. Back then they wore different shoes on their kicking foot and somebody took his shoe or he couldn't find it. So he didn't have a shoe to kick with and he went in and missed the kick with his regular shoe."

"I'll take it any way I can get it," said Parilli, "This league is so balanced that all games are close. We have had three tough games. I was down thinking it was

going to happen again at the end. 'How many ways can we lose?' I was starting to ask myself."

A couple hundred Stars fans actually made the trip to Philadelphia for the game, and chanted, "Let's go Stars, let's go Stars," while basically having themselves a good time.

"I've been a Giant fan all my life," said Steve Foss of Astoria, "I saw the New York Titans play their first game in the Polo Grounds, but now I'm rooting for the Stars. Somehow they make losing exciting."

New York showed it could also make winning exciting, going on a tear by prevailing in their next five games in a row. Parilli shook up his defensive front four by benching Larry Estes in favor of Steve Setzler and Jerry Ellison.

On July 31st, the Stars hosted Jacksonville before 15,648 in the still dimly-lit Downing Stadium. The lights still hadn't been changed from the home opener two weeks before, and team management blamed it on bureaucratic bumbling among various city employees.

The Stars did some bumbling of their own against the Sharks, turning the ball over three times. But New York's defense punished Jacksonville, knocking out both their two quarterbacks in the span of three plays in the third quarter. "We have a pretty gutsy football team which can play well in the second half," said Parilli after the 24-16 victory. The Stars survived a scare from rookie running back Jeff Davis, who got a crash-course in quarterbacking and came close to rallying the Sharks.

A few days after beating the Sharks, the Stars sent Larry Estes, who had lost his starting job to Steve Setzler, and linebacker Gary Champagne to Birmingham for a 1975 draft choice and future considerations.

"We thought Estes was a bit weak against the run," said Parilli at the time, "It's a matter of judgment. Right now Steve Setzler is the fourth man. He missed two earlier games with a knee injury. Jerry Ellison also has been in the picture, but he is on the inactive list now."

Despite some sloppy play—New York lost four fumbles and had several costly penalties—the Stars, shut out until the last play of the first half, rallied to edge Southern California 11-8 on the West Coast. "If we can win when we play poorly," said Parilli, "it shows we are a gutty team. This is our third last-quarter victory." The Stars defense put heavy pressure on Sun quarterback Tony Adams, sacking him 6 times for 43 yards. "Our pass rush was good," said Parilli.

On a third down and two yards to go situation midway through the fourth quarter, Tom Sherman teamed with Bert Askson for a 40-yard touchdown pass to put New York ahead to stay. Sacks by linebackers Tom Chandler and James Sims kept the Sun at bay in the late going.

The Stars then crushed Portland 38-16 before 16,222 at Downing Stadium, which finally boasted a new and improved light standard that lit up the field around the 50-yard line. Bob Keating said he promised that the other seven standards would be gradually brought up to snuff. Keating also said he was going to ask if the team could use Shea Stadium for some of their October games once the Mets' season was over. His request was turned down, however.

Against the Storm, Tom Sherman threw a pair of touchdown passes to George Sauer and scored another himself.

"I thought we could pass on them and we did, so I didn't even worry about the ground game at all at one point in the second quarter," said Sherman, "Didn't Sauer play a fine game? He faked that one cornerback out of his dressing and out of the park.

"Working with George is special," Sherman added, "You can throw the ball when he makes his break. He never changes his pattern."

"That's better," said Sauer, who gained 93 yards on seven receptions, "It took me longer to come around than I thought it would. Maybe I'll have to start thinking like an older ball player. I never had much speed anyway, but I run my patterns the same way."

On August 16th, headlines appeared saying that the Stars were reportedly for sale. General Manager Bob Keating, responding to a report in the *New York Post* that a "for sale" sign hung over the franchise, said, " I wouldn't doubt that the club is for sale. There have been overtures from buyers since he (Bob Schmertz) bought the club." The *Post* story quoted an "unidentified" WFL source as saying that Schmertz was looking to sell the team for $6 million to a person described in the article as "fairly well known outside of sports."

Schmertz was reported to be in financial trouble. His major asset, Leisure Technology, a land development firm, had recently taken a hit on the stock market. He lost a $3.75 million lawsuit in connection with the Celtics, and saw his total net worth plummet from $25 million to $9 million.

"I don't think he's the kind of man to give up control even if he does sell part of the team," continued Keating, "He has said he is willing to listen, though."

Several days later, as the Stars prepared to host Houston, Sauer pulled a calf muscle in practice and was scratched from the lineup. Kick returner Bob Hermanni was out with a groin pull. The shorthanded Stars turned to running back Bob "Harpo" Gladieux,

who had been cut 12 times during his stay in the NFL. Gladieux scored four touchdowns as the Stars beat Houston, 43-10. "Naturally, I always thought I could contribute something to any club," Gladieux said, "but after last year I felt my career was over. It was my fourth year and I was beginning to feel everybody was just trying to cut me out of my pension. I was seriously thinking of trying to get a job coaching." The Stars were glad he didn't. "Harpo," nicknamed for his resemblance to Harpo Marx due to his mop of curly, brown hair, ran for a game-high 84 yards. Ed White added 69 yards and Davey Richards chipped in with 63.

"It was easier than I expected," said Parilli, "I didn't sleep the night before, worrying, but we have great pride and guys are getting the hang of it. We didn't have to throw as much as I thought we would." Thanks to Gladieux.

The team had now won five games in a row, thanks in part to a stingy defense that was third in the league in total defense and had allowed only four rushing touchdowns in the first seven games.

"The Stars have to be tough to move the ball on with John and Gerry in there," said their old teammate, Don Maynard, who had signed with Houston.

Another big reason for their success was veteran defensive tackle Lloyd Voss, who had been cut loose by the Packers, Broncos, Steelers and Patriots, but seemed to have found a home with the Stars. "Lloyd is good against the rush," said GM Bob Keating, "He doesn't get trapped very often—and that means a lot in the WFL."

"The old adage about the last man out of the backfield having the ball still is true most of the time," said Voss.

Coincidentally, the team's winning streak was stopped by those same Texans a week later.

"They kicked our tails," said John Elliott of the 14-11 loss, "They came to prove something, and they did it."

"When we got behind they went into a 3-5 defense and came like horses," said Harpo Gladieux, who was held to just 26 yards rushing after gaining 84 the week before.

Linebacker James Sims pried the ball loose from Houston quarterback D.C. Nobles and ran for an apparent touchdown, but the play was blown dead by what the Stars thought was a "quick" whistle.

The Stars suffered another setback during the game when they lost wide receiver Al Young for five weeks with a dislocated elbow.

The game was also notable because of a surprise addition to the Houston roster: John Matuszak. The Tooz had been AWOL from the NFL's Houston Oilers just 48 hours earlier, and signed with the Texans earlier that day.

"These sheriffs came walking out onto the field and escorted him off," recalled Babe Parilli, "They handed him a restraining order, and he sat on the sidelines. Matuszak just sat there on the sidelines. I thought I had seen it all."

In another twist to the game, Stars' GM Bob Keating protested the game afterward because Houston dressed 39 players instead of the league limit of 37.

"Terry Cole and Paul Zaeske were the extra players dressed by Jim Garrett of the Texans," said Keating. He further indicated that the problem was caused when Houston picked up offensive tackle Bill Yoest and wide receiver Billy Walik from Florida prior to the game and did not declare them active or inactive. Nothing came of the protest and the result stood.

The Stars had mixed results in the next few weeks, winning over Philadelphia again, losing to Florida in the rain, defeating Portland on the road but losing to The Hawaiians in sunny Honolulu. To improve the roster, New York began to pick up several players from the NFL waiver wire. Among them were defensive tackle Carter Campbell, cornerback John Dockery, another ex-Jet, and Don Highsmith, a running back released by the Raiders who turned out to be a great addition to the Stars running attack. "Don Highsmith was a good back," said Parilli, "he had played for the Raiders. He had more ability than Bob Gladieux, but Gladieux was tougher."

The Stars performed better on the field and were a nice alternative to the more expensive, yet losing, Giants and Jets.

"The Jets and Giants were losing, and I think we got better (press) coverage than them," recalled Parilli, "I knew a lot of these writers from my days with the Jets."

For all their on-field success, the Stars were dragged down by serious off-field financial problems. Like most WFL teams, they were badly undercapitalized. Their fiscal structure began to founder when Schmertz's money problems continued. On top of his other troubles, Schmertz was now involved in a nasty divorce.

The Stars' biggest problem, of course, was Downing Stadium. Despite Schmertz pumping over $200,000 into renovations, it was completely inadequate even as a temporary facility. The lights were holdovers from old Ebbett's Field, and they didn't supply nearly enough candlepower for the field. This led to a lot of complaints and jokes from the players, fans and the press.

"It was dark at the ends and light in the middle," said defensive tackle Greg Lens, "The quarterbacks had to carry flashlights so they could read the plays on their arm bands."

"This is the only stadium, and the only league," said Gerry Philbin, "where they decide on the coin flip whether they'll take the well-lit side or the dull side."

"It's depressing to us so you can imagine what it's like for someone coming in here for the first time," said Bob Gladieux, "This is the worst football field I've ever played on in my life and it's the worst field in pro football. It has to be a natural letdown for someone to come into the bright lights of New York, look around the big city, and then come to this place to play."

"The lights were terrible," said Florida linebacker Larry Ely, "you could hardly see the game. There wasn't enough light."

"It was awful," said Birmingham quarterback George Mira, "The lights were bad."

"Downing Stadium was very interesting to say the least." said Stars offensive guard/tackle Darrel Bunge. "The open end faced the state penitentiary . . . we shared the locker room with rodents."

"The Stars play at Triborough Stadium," said one newspaper report, "with eight small candles strategically placed, four on each side of the stadium."

In their book *The Football Hall of Shame*, Bruce Nash and Allan Zullo wrote that "the lights were so bad the players should have used lighted coal miners' helmets to see inside the 20-yard lines."

"Downing Stadium was like playing at a high school field," Parilli said in an interview with a WFL web site, "It wasn't much more than that. A poor grass field with old stands on either side. We had to put lights in because you couldn't see the ball when we played. If you stood at one end zone, you couldn't see the other end zone; the lights just lit up the middle of the field. We spent a lot of money getting lights into that stadium. Unfortunately, we didn't have a major league field to play in and go along with the vision of what Bob Schmertz thought the team could be. We were forced to play in Downing Stadium out on Randall's Island. The stadium had eight candlepower for night games, and Bob put a lot of money into it to try to renovate it and make it suitable for professional football.

"The stadium kept the crowds away," Parilli concluded, "We averaged about 12,000 at Downing, but people didn't want to come down to that end of town. You had to pay a toll to cross over the river, and then there were traffic jams leading into the stadium."

Downing was nearly inaccessible from most parts of the city, and it had not been well maintained in at least 20 years. The field was mostly sand and dirt. Amenities for fans, players and the press were virtually nonexistent. The toilets in the locker room frequently overflowed. During the home opener, the Stars' radio announcers had to sit on orange crates because there were no chairs in the press box; their Birmingham counterparts had to stand. Parking was inadequate. It soon became obvious that Schmertz and Baldwin wouldn't have enough money to finish the season. With the Stars over a million dollars in debt and unable to afford to upgrade Downing Stadium to anything approaching professional standards, the WFL resigned itself to abandoning the nation's biggest market.

"New York had too many big teams and too many big names," said defensive tackle Greg Lens, "Everything was a hassle and New Yorkers are just cold. They couldn't have cared less.

"New York is nice to visit," Lens concluded, "but I don't want to live there."

On Labor Day, before only 5,237 people at Downing, Sherman's first-half passes gave New York an early lead and Bob Gladieux' second-half running allowed them to keep it. Sherman, a conservative quarterback, passed for two New York touchdowns and ran for a third to lead the Stars past the Philadelphia Bell 24-16.

New York built a 21-8 lead at the intermission and then switched to the ground game. Gladieux responded with a league-record 161 yards on 28 carries, most of them during the second half.

"I didn't expect to come out throwing that way," said Sherman, "but it just seemed to work. I like to vary the plays 50-50. Later we had to go to Gladieux."

Gladieux didn't realize how much yardage he had gained. "I thought I had about 120 yards, not 161," he said.

"I want to get into the playoffs so that when all those new guys come into the WFL next year our team will be pretty well respected," said Gladieux.

The Stars intercepted five of King Corcoran's passes, three of them in the third quarter. A sixth interception was nullified by a penalty.

Sherman's touchdown passes covered 28 yards to Bert Askson and nine yards to Ray Parson. He ran one yard for the third score and Moses Lajtermann added a 29-yard field goal in the fourth period.

The victory gave New York, which had won six of its last seven games, a 6-and-3 record tying them with Florida for first place in the Eastern Division, and setting up a showdown with the Blazers for the top spot in the division four days later at Downing. The Stars sold 14,625 advance tickets for the game, more than

the Yankees sold for their game at Shea, and the team was expecting a big turnout.

Unfortunately, Hurricane Carmen arrived in town with the Blazers and torrential rains pounded Randall's Island and the entire metropolitan area. Because of that, only 3,830 fans showed up for the game, and most of them hid in the runways to avoid the downpours.

The Stars obviously couldn't do anything about the weather, but the attendance figure was what made the headlines, and made the Stars—and the league—look bad.

The field was a sloppy mess and just got worse as the game progressed. "The field was worse than just muddy," said Parilli, "Once you committed yourself, you couldn't recover."

Florida jumped out to a 10-0 lead and Tommy Reamon, running like the sun was shining and the field was dry, broke Gladieux's four day old league record with 179 yards rushing and a touchdown as the Blazers edged the Stars, 17-15.

"Reamon is a great mudder," said Gladieux, who was held to 74 yards before he left the game with an injury, "He helped Missouri upset Notre Dame a few years back—and that was on a wishbone team."

Despite Reamon's efforts, the Stars hung tough and almost pulled it out. Late in the game, Tom Sherman marched his club to the Florida 22-yard line, well within field goal range. But on third and eight, New York was called for delay of game, moving the ball back to the 27. On the next play, Sherman was sacked for an 18-yard loss. From his own 45, Sherman tried to reach Sauer with a desperation pass but it fell to the muddy turf incomplete.

New York continued to make personnel moves in an effort to bolster their roster. Two days after losing to Florida, the Stars signed 10-year NFL veteran offensive guard Len St. Jean and CFL veteran linebacker Marty Huff. A day later, the Stars picked up linebacker Bob Grant from the Bell and Highsmith and quarterback Brian Dowling from the NFL waiver wire.

The Stars flew to Portland to face the Storm again for the second time in less than a month. New York had handled Portland easily in the first game, and did so again, winning 34-15. Coupled with a Florida loss, the Star victory put them back into a tie for first place with the Blazers. Both clubs had 7-and-4 records.

The Stars took control of the Portland game in the third quarter, holding the ball for over 11 minutes and scoring 11 points on a Jim Ford touchdown run and a field goal by Mo Lajterman. Ford, subbing for an injured Gladieux, rushed for a game-high 78 yards and two touchdowns. Tom Sherman completed 11 of 18 passes for 112 yards and a touchdown.

In a desperate attempt to stay out of the Western Division cellar, the Storm put recent signee Pete Beathard into the game in the last quarter, but on his second play, he was hit by Carter Campbell and fumbled, with Lloyd Voss recovering. When Portland got the ball back, Beathard threw the ball right to James Sims who returned the ball 17 yards for a touchdown that wrapped it up.

Tied for first place, the Stars flew to Honolulu to face The Hawaiians. The game, originally scheduled for Sunday the 15th, due to The Hawaiians insistence on Sunday football, had been moved to Wednesday the 18th when the franchise realized Sunday contests weren't going to be successful. If this game was any indication, the weeknight games weren't going to cut it either. Only 12,169 fans, less than half the capacity of Honolulu Stadium, came out for the game.

With Gladieux still out, Parilli turned Don Highsmith loose and the Raider castoff rushed for 62 yards and a touchdown. But Tom Sherman had a bad game, completing just 10 of 26 passes for 132 yards, and had two picks. The Stars also lost two fumbles, and lost the game, 17-14 on two late field goals by The Hawaiians.

"We played a very poor game," said Parilli, "We showed no consistency at all and our defense did not play up to its potential."

The Stars were haunted by running back Albert Davis, who they had cast adrift in training camp. Davis had signed with The Hawaiians and rushed for 125 yards in the game. His running set up both the tying touchdown and winning field goal.

The defense had been sluggish and showed the effects of the long road trip to Portland and then Hawaii. Parilli revealed that he was considering more personnel changes.

Sure enough, on the 21st, Parilli picked up two ex-Jets, defensive back John Dockery and defensive end Joey Jackson, and also signed wide receiver Al Barnes, cut loose by the Lions. Two days later, the Stars signed former Eagles' running back Lee Bouggess. To make room for the newcomers, the team released defensive back Wendell Wilson, linebacker Dana Carpenter, and running back Andy Huff.

On Tuesday, September 24th, 1974 (the game was moved from Wednesday because of Yom Kippur) the Stars hosted the Detroit Wheels. It would turn out to be the team's final home game in New York. Ironically, that same day, the 33 owners of the Detroit Wheels filed for bankruptcy. Called the "Bankrupt Bowl" by the press, the Stars blew out the destitute Wheels,

37-7. Don Highsmith scored the first touchdown and rushed for 122 yards on 19 carries. Steve Dennis had three of the Stars' five interceptions.

But the game drew only 4,220 diehards to Downing Stadium, second-lowest attendance figure of the season.

"I guess there were more people in the bars at Shea than in the stands here tonight," Gerry Philbin said, referring to the Yankees-Red Sox contest held that night in the middle of a heated American League East pennant race. The handwriting was on the wall, and it may as well have read "Going Out of Business." The Stars and the WFL were not going to "make it" in the Big Apple. And, it began looking more and more like the WFL might not "make it" anywhere.

"I first realized that there were financial problems after the Detroit Wheels came to play us at Downing," recalled Babe Parilli, "After the game I was told the Wheels were disbanding, and that was the first indication that the WFL was in trouble."

The franchise had suffered incredible financial losses. By September, the team had managed to accrue over $2 million in debt, and could claim just $94,000 in assets. It was obvious New York was not going to work out for the new league. The team was solid but playing in Downing Stadium made the team nothing but a worm in the Big Apple.

"Downing Stadium proved to be simply an inadequate facility," said Howard Baldwin, "The edifice itself, the playing field, the improper lighting and the access roads all combined against us."

The thing of it was, the owners knew all that before the team even began playing there. It was no mystery that Downing Stadium was a miserable dump. You would have thought that they might have reconsidered playing there to begin with.

In any event, something had to be done. Schmertz refused to dump anymore money into the team. Bob Keating said he could have moved the team to Bridgeport, Connecticut, but Schmertz, who had put $2-million into the team, just wanted his money back. He was not willing to wait for who knew how long for nature, inflation, fan interest or divine intervention to eventually recoup his losses.

"It cost $30,000 to play each game at Randall's Island," said Keating (another fact that the team might have considered before signing a lease to play there), "I could have had Bridgeport with Astroturf for $2,000, but Schmertz wanted to sell."

Bridgeport? Two-grand a game? Where was this option earlier, and had it even been considered by anyone? Didn't saving $28,000 a week sound like a good idea?

It seemed like the Stars had blown a golden opportunity. With both the Giants and Jets floundering near the bottom of the standings, and the Giants committed to a move to New Jersey, the Stars had a great chance to solidify themselves in New York. With some better decisions, the team might have been able to gain a foothold in the city and found a level of success.

But instead they blew it by playing their games in an awful facility in an awful location, and then wondering why no one came out to see them.

CHAPTER 13

For Whom the Bell Tolls

The Philadelphia Bell, 1974

"What can I say? I lied. I never thought those figures would come out."

—BARRY LEIB, Philadelphia Executive Vice-President, after the Papergate scandal

The Philadelphia Bell was yet another franchise that got off to a shaky start. Several prospective owners were forced to drop out. The first of these was Ken Bogdanoff, a ticket-taker for Flyers games and out-of-work lifeguard, who wanted to buy into the franchise but had only one problem—he had no money. He was able to scrape up $25,000 as part of a retainer fee, but a partner backed out and then so did Bogdanoff (although he was given a low-level position with the team, a gift from Davidson, but still somewhat further down the trough from "owner").

After that fiasco, Davidson was willing to sell the team—which was by the way his own "floating franchise," a perk as commissioner that Davidson had discovered in both the ABA and the WHA—to investor Harry Jay Katz. Alas, Davidson would learn that Katz didn't have the strong resources he claimed he did, and that indeed his father was the one in the family with the deep pockets. Like Bud Hucul in Detroit, Katz was also the target of several lawsuits. Davidson pulled back his offer to sell the rights to Katz, but not before Katz found his way onto ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, where Howard Cosell asked him why he would buy into a WFL team. Katz didn't hesitate. "Cheerleaders," he said. After both of those messes, Davidson finally found buyers in Al Sica and his son-in-law John Bosacco, a prominent Philadelphia attorney.

Bosacco would be highly regarded by nearly everyone in the Philadelphia organization and others around the WFL. "What a classy guy," said kicker Bob Cooper, "I remember how he'd drive to practice in his Ferrari Daytona, impeccably dressed and coiffed, a babe on his arm. I didn't have much interaction with him, but sat next to him at some newspaper banquet thing. Seemed like a super nice man. Several years after the league folded, I called his office and spoke briefly to him. I needed a solid referral for a grad assistant coaching job, and he called the AD at the school within minutes to give me one. I was grateful."

"He talked to the team," mentioned running back John Land about Bosacco. "He told us he was behind us, win, lose or draw. That meant a lot to the team."

"John was a very articulate person and a driving force in the league," said Hugh Wyatt, the Bell's Director of Player Personnel, "He was a lawyer from Media, Pennsylvania and I think he got in over his head but enjoyed the thought of owning the Bell and being in the WFL."

"John Bosacco has made us a cohesive organization," added head coach Ron Waller at the time.

Sica and Bosacco then brought in John B. Kelly, Jr., a local prominent citizen who had been one of the greatest athletes produced by the city, as team president.

When Kelly was announced as an investor and the team's president, someone reminded him of the failure of the World Hockey Association's Philadelphia Blazers, who lasted all of one season while competing against the established National Hockey League Flyers.

"We think we'll be successful or we wouldn't be here," Kelly countered. "In some ways we're not competing with the Eagles. We'll be playing our games on Wednesday night. Actually, Len Tose (Philadelphia Eagles' owner) and I are good friends. The Eagles are sold out and we expect to get some of their leftovers initially. Then, we hope to create our own following."

"Jack was basically a figurehead," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "I don't know if he had invested in the team or the

league. Jack Kelly was a local hero, a champion oarsmen and football player. His name, and his family name, held a lot of credibility. It was shattering for me to find out that Jack Kelly, a guy who was so prominent to me as a kid, was really just a face for the cameras. He was out in front to lure people in who could pay the bills."

Now that there was a team, it needed a place to play. That was going to take some doing, as it turned out. "The Bell couldn't get into Veterans Stadium," said Wyatt, "the Eagles had an exclusive contract with the city." The team wanted to play its home games in Franklin Field on the University of Pennsylvania campus. But Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo, a close friend of Eagles' owner Leonard Tose, did all he could to put the kibosh on the Bell's plans. "When Rizzo heard that the Bell was trying to get into Franklin Field," added Wyatt, "he threatened the University of Penn with the removal of their tax exempt status."

So Franklin Field was now out. The franchise would have to either find a new home in the city or be forced to move to another city. Rumors spread that the team might pack up and move to Mexico City. But the owners finally reached an agreement to use JFK Stadium, which sat 100,000 people but was old and rundown.

"We were disappointed when we couldn't play in Franklin Field," said Kelly, "We reassessed our situation and we felt the league was more viable than ever. JFK has not always been considered the greatest stadium to watch football, but it was an awful good alternative" (the key word here being "awful").

But Vince Papale didn't see JFK as an oversized, antiquated, dimly-lit eyesore. Instead, he called it "our advantage."

"The other teams come in here, take a look around and get psyched out," Papale said. "And besides, we know where all the hills and valleys are in that 'astrograss.'"

The ownership group was going to call the team the Yellow Jackets in homage to a legendary NFL franchise from the 1920s, but then changed the name to the Philadelphia Express. They finally decided on the Bell, in honor of the Liberty Bell. When the Bell opened their team offices, however, they were inundated with telephone calls from irate customers calling to complain that they were unhappy with their telephone service.

"We were in the old Keystone Automobile building below the Bellevue Stratford," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "The building has been torn down now in downtown Philadelphia. There were winos outside on the sidewalk, and the offices were always cold. The funniest thing about the offices in Philadelphia is that we got more calls from people who thought we were the phone company, Philadelphia Bell, than actual ticket buyers. People would come in there at 10 o'clock at night complaining about their phone bill. One time, this crazy guy walks in and keeps saying over and over, 'I gotta call France, I gotta call France.' I'm trying to explain to the guy that we weren't the phone company we were a football team. The guy starts in again with, 'I gotta call France, I gotta call France.'"

Many sources have also referred to the team as the "Philadelphia Bells." This may be the reason one team executive came up with the idea to give away free tiny bells to all fans at one of the games. These chintzy little things wouldn't have qualified for the toes on Ali Baba's shoes.

"Gene Kolber, he was our promotional guy, came up with the craziest promotion," recalled Wyatt, "He got up in front of us one day and says, 'Gentlemen, we have a promotion—BELLS!!!' These little ass bells with a Bell sticker on it . . . like people were gonna line up for these little cheap bells."

The team named former NFL player and coach Ron Waller as their head coach and General Manager. Waller was coming off a stint as interim head coach of the San Diego Chargers, coaching a team described as a "drug-addled mess" to a 1-and-5 record in the last six games of the 1973 season.

"Waller had cleaned up the San Diego Chargers," said Hugh Wyatt, "There were all kinds of drug problems in San Diego and Waller was the interim coach and kept the team together."

Waller had also coached in the minor leagues with a number of teams, including the Wilmington Clippers, Harrisburg Capitols, Pottstown Firebirds and Norfolk Neptunes. "You do it all in the minors," Waller said once, "I was a coach, general manager, director of ticket sales and PR man. I am as familiar with front office intrigue as I am with diagramming plays." He loved to run an offense full of razzle-dazzle plays and wacky formations. "I don't think the offense was as much particularly potent as it was flashy," recalled Wyatt.

With Waller running things, the Bell signed a lot of ex-minor leaguers that he was familiar with, especially players from Waller's old club in Pottstown. Defensive tackle Tommie Davis, wide receiver Ron Holliday, running backs John Land, Frank McGuigan, and Claude Watts, center Leo Levandoski, and safety Bryan Marshall, all former Firebirds, eventually saw action with the Bell, while ex-Firebirds Bill Stetz and Steve Zegalia got tryouts with the team. The Bell would also sign Penn State rookies Gary Gray, Carroll Cayette, Dave Joyner, and Carl Schaukowitch, but missed out

on their big target, Heisman Trophy winner John Cappelletti, who signed with the Rams. The player that received the most ink, however, was quarterback James Sean Patrick "King" Corcoran.

Corcoran was the cocky, outspoken, flamboyant "Joe Namath of the minor leagues," as he liked to describe himself. He had bounced around pro football since 1966, wearing out his welcome with the Broncos, the Jets, the Patriots, and the Eagles. He also played for the Waterbury Orbits, Lowell Giants and most famously the Pottstown Firebirds in the minor leagues. He also tried his luck with the Canadian Football League. His checkered past did nothing to temper his confidence. "I have super confidence in myself," crowed the King, "I'm 31, at my peak. I can read a defense and I have good leadership ability."

In case you didn't want to read about the King, he was more than happy to tell you his story.

"I've got every rap against me a player can have," said Corcoran, "difficult to handle, flamboyant, changes the game plan, too small for the NFL, terrorizes coaches, you name it, I've got it.

"In the minors I was the superstar," the All-American from Maryland went on to say, "I hired my own public relations man. An extra 3,000 to 5,000 people would come to the games just to boo me. They had to make the introductions five minutes early to have time for the boos."

"I just never got a fair shot in a big league camp before," maintained the King, a plain-talking free spirit who said he got the "King" nickname by saluting the crowd after throwing touchdown passes in high school.

The King was definitely his own man. Corcoran refused to ride in the team bus to games, instead tooling along in his custom Lincoln Continental.

"Jimmy was a funny, cocky, guy," said Hugh Wyatt, "He was an interesting person. He drove a big white Lincoln and his license plate was 'King V.'"

Corcoran had his supporters, most importantly his head coach. "He is a winner," said Ron Waller, "I have never had any problems with him that couldn't be handled. He's better than any quarterback I had last year with San Diego, except for Johnny Unitas."

Corcoran reveled in that kind of compliment.

"After I tear up this league," the King liked to boast, "I'm gonna try to swing a setup like that guy Mike Douglas has."

Say what you want about him, the eccentric quarterback made an impression. Former Pottstown teammate and Chicago Fire wide receiver Jack Dolbin might have put it best. "He was an asshole," said Dolbin, "but he was *our* asshole."

Size does matter . . .

Hugh Wyatt, the Bell's Director of Player Personnel, remembered a story from Philadelphia's training camp in 1974. "We were sitting in a room at Glassboro State, now Rowan College," recalled Wyatt, "and trying to decide who to cut from the team, and we hadn't been able to get the number down and in walks Bobby Colona, the equipment manager and he says, 'Hey coach, can I ask a favor of ya? Can you cut a couple of 7¼'s, I don't have enough helmets.' Everyone in the room just broke up and started laughing." Makes one wonder just how many players were cut by the Bell simply because they had a size 7¼ head.

The Bell, like the other Wiffle teams, had platoons of men in training camp trying out and following a dream. Players could be cut left and right at times. Sometimes, however, the team found it hard to cut someone. "We had this guy named Lance Cotton," said Wyatt, "He was a big, tough looking, football player. He was an offensive lineman, and he was a bit surly. One day, Ernie Wright, our offensive line coach had to cut a guy and the guy was Lance Cotton, whose brother Craig Cotton played for the Bears. Ernie says, 'Well . . . you know we should really take a look at him on defense.' Nick Cutro, the defensive coach, and Ernie get into a argument over who is going to cut Lance Cotton because no one wanted to cut the guy and face him while they did it. Lance was really tough, he was a former boxer." And he must not have had a size 7¼ head.

The Bell, considered by some to be one of the league's weaker franchises, opened their season at home on July 10th. Team and league officials were absolutely stunned when the opener attracted 55,534 people to JFK Stadium for the contest with the Portland Storm. This was despite the fact that when team officials got to the stadium they found the ticket booths locked and they had to drill the locks off. The figure was made even more remarkable by the fact that 34,000 people were in attendance across the street watching a baseball game between the Phillies and the Dodgers in Veterans Stadium.

"It was a hot, humid, summer night and the Phillies were playing across the street and there was a rock concert at the Spectrum," said Wyatt, "Outside the stadium there was one of the biggest traffic jams in the history of the world. The Phillies were upset 'cause their fans walked away because of the crowds."

The Bell crushed Portland, 33-8 to open their season. Claude Watts—94 yards—and John Land—73—paced a strong running attack, while King Corcoran hit on 21 of 38 passes for 227 yards and a couple of touchdowns.

"I think what we've got is the wildest offense in pro football," Corcoran said, "People haven't seen anything like this one with the Triple-I, the Double-I, stacks, motion and every set imaginable. That's what the WFL is all about: That's to bring entertainment back to the people."

In a rare moment of modesty, the King told reporters after the game, "Am I the best quarterback in the city? No I'd say Roman Gabriel (of the Eagles) is the best."

"In-Vince-ible"

Bell receiver Vince Papale caught the first pass in WFL history. "I never played college football, and I lied about my age at a tryout camp," said Papale, who became a 28-year-old WFL walk on. "I was a track man at St. Joseph's University, so the World Football League became my college football." Papale had been bartending at Monkster's Club in Prospect Park and substitute teaching at Interboro High School, when he decided to try out for the Bell. He caught nine passes for 121 yards; an average of 13.4 yards-per-catch. His overall performance with the Bell earned him a meeting with the new head coach of the Philadelphia Eagles, Dick Vermeil. Afterwards GM Jim Murray gave him an invitation to a private workout hosted by Vermeil. Papale eventually made the team, thereby becoming the oldest rookie in NFL history, at 30 years old, without having played a down of football in college. He went on to play wide receiver and on special teams for the Eagles from 1976 to 1978. During that time, he played in 41 of 44 regular season games, recording two fumble recoveries, and a 15-yard reception. Papale was voted Special Teams Captain by his teammates, and was the Eagles "Man of the Year" in 1978 for his charitable contributions. Sadly, Papale's career was ended in 1979 by a shoulder injury. After retiring from the NFL, he worked in the field of radio and television broadcasting for eight years, then became a commercial mortgage banker. Papale is currently the Regional Director of Marketing and Senior Account Executive for Sallie Mae. He resides with his wife Janet and two children, Gabriella and Vincent, in Cherry Hill, NJ. Papale, a diehard fan of Philadelphia Eagles football, is listed as the Secretary/Treasurer of the Philadelphia Chapter of the NFL Alumni Association. Papale's unlikely football career was made into a movie called *Invincible*, which starred Mark Wahlberg as Papale, and which some described as a cross between *Rocky* and *The Rookie*. Papale is also a very much-sought-after inspiration speaker.

After their promising start, the Bell flew to Houston to play the Texans, but their offense wasn't wild and it sure didn't entertain anyone. They gained only 60 yards on the ground and Corcoran completed only 8 of 24 passes before he was yanked for Mike Yancheff late in the game. Needless to say, Corcoran didn't compare himself to any quarterbacks after the 11-0 loss.

"The touchdown came off a flat pass that Corcoran threw," explained Hugh Wyatt, "I don't know if Waller called it or King did, but Ron Waller was wild. He was livid because I think it was the first time he had been shut out."

John B. Kelly recalled an incident before Philadelphia's next home game against the New York Stars. "A police van backed into a chain link fence and broke it, and 5,000 people ran in for nothing," said Kelly, "Then, when the ticket lines got too long, people were giving ticket takers a buck to look the other way. That was money that went in the ticket takers' pocket, money we never saw, money we really needed."

The field, as Hugh Wyatt remembered, was a mess for the game. "A car show, the 'Uniroyal Show' had been at JFK, and the turf was torn up and the city just slapped down these huge pieces of sod and the players were ripping it up in huge chunks," he said.

Corcoran was back in form against the Stars, and despite two picks completed 14 of 24 passes for 215 yards and a couple scores. But the Bell lost 17-15 as they missed two field goal tries in the last couple of minutes.

"I guarantee you he (Simcsak) won't be our kicker anymore," fumed Waller afterward, who missed a 36-yard kick with about two minutes left, "We'll find ourselves a new man. I don't know where he'll come from. But no matter what, Simcsak is out."

Simcsak sat nearby listening quietly. He did say the missed field goal was not his fault, but instead was the result of holder Don Shanklin's poor handling of the snap.

"Was it entirely my fault?" Simcsak asked, "I don't think so. I was ready to meet the ball and the ball wasn't there. How could I get off a solid kick?"

With one second left, Waller sent linebacker George Chatlos in to try a 26-yarder. "I thought Chatlos was kicking better in practice, but what happens under pressure is what counts," said Waller after Chatlos shanked the attempt off to the left, "He just shanked it."

Chatlos may have missed because he couldn't find his kicking shoe.

"Everything that could go wrong went wrong," said Hugh Wyatt, "All kinds of kids, hoodlums, were walking the track and taking things from the bench, and one of the things that they took was the kicker's shoe. We needed a last second field goal, I think it was George Chatlos, who missed the kick 'cause he didn't have his shoe. It was another huge crowd, but a rather disorderly crowd."

The crowd totaled 64,719, a record for the new league. But rumors began to spread that the Bell had possibly inflated the attendance figures for their first two home games.

Waller was if nothing else a man of his word. Sure enough, after the loss to New York, the head coach canned Simcsak and signed Richie Szaro, who had been cut by Florida in training camp.

On July 31st, the Bell faced Portland for the second time in less than a month. The journey to Oregon showed just how crazy some of the road trips were in the WFL.

"Travel was nuts to begin with and this had to be the mother of all bad trips," recalled assistant equipment manager Mike Fox. "We were flying to Portland from Philly on what seemed to be a local plane. I say local because of all the stops we made. The more I tell the story, the more stops it took, but in reality it was close to five stops and layovers including a 1½ hour layover in Seattle, landing as we are looking at the lights in Portland!

"So we finally get to Portland and they have an old school bus to pick us up," Fox continued. "I go with Tom [*head trainer Tom Altieri*] in his car and we drive to the hotel. The team bus breaks down and the guys walk to the hotel. Some tried a shortcut and found a fence around the hotel with barbed wire. It was several hours before we stopped all the bleeding."

Things didn't get any less confused once the team finally got to Civic Stadium. "We then go into the stadium," remembered Fox. "It was an old baseball stadium that was lined for football, baseball and soccer. For whatever reason, they decided that they should move the field around, so they relined the football field in a different direction. All the lines were white, all permanent paint. We kick off and there are whistles all over the place. They ruled the ball dead in the end zone, even though the ball was on the 25 yard line. With all the lines, they had no clue which line was which.

"Luckily, the trip home was uneventful," Fox concluded. Once everyone got the yard markers straightened out, Philadelphia was able to again easily handle the winless Storm, 25-7 behind two Corcoran to LeVell Hill touchdown passes. A blocked punt by Lorenzo Brinkley set up a 31-yard John Land touchdown run, Philadelphia forced five turnovers and the Bell shut out the Storm until the fourth quarter.

After defeating Portland, the Bell flew home and flew right into the middle of a public-relations storm of epic proportions. The rumors of inflated attendance figures had indeed, and unfortunately, proved to be true. As it turned out, Philadelphia had indeed "papered the house"—inflated their attendance figures—by adding free tickets and discounted tickets into their total attendance figure.

Now giving away tickets is as old as sports itself, as teams' will routinely give away tickets for promotions to radio stations and supermarkets, and discount tickets for businesses. However, in most cases, this involves a small percentage of the total attendance figure. The WFL had instead turned this practice into a bizarre art form.

The Bell, whose first two home games supposedly totaled 120,253 fans, admitted that 100,198 tickets had been given away for free or sold at significantly reduced prices.

The league's credibility, as well as its resources, was suddenly very much in question. Without a major television contract, WFL teams had to survive on their gate receipts, and in an operation reporters began to call "the World Freebie League," gate receipts were crucial.

The Bell's Executive Vice President, Barry Leib, assured himself a place in sports history when he was forced to announce that instead of 55,534 for the opener and 64,719 for the second contest, the actual paid attendance figures were 13,855 and 6,200. This came to be known as the "Papergate" scandal. Others referred to it as "Sugargate," since most of the free or discounted tickets involved were because of a promotion with Domino Sugar. Leib confessed, "What can I say? I lied. I never thought those figures would come out. I admit I lied to reporters. I never regarded a reporter as a priest."

"The second game was on TV," Leib continued, "How would it have looked if no one was there?"

"If the truth got out," Leib concluded, "we would have been a joke."

As if you weren't?

"Barry Leib," remembered Hugh Wyatt, "He was the business manager, he did all the lying. It wasn't his idea but he took the hit. Stan Hochman wrote the most incredible story in the *Daily News* about a week after that and at the end he wrote . . . 'Ok, ok so I lied, who does it hurt?' That's what Leib was saying to everyone. 'Papergate,' or so they called it, hurt our credibility. Many of the tickets were sold at discount prices, to corporate accounts, $8 tickets for $2, for example. Leib didn't understand that it would hurt the team . . . I remember him saying, 'I never thought of a reporter as a priest.' Philadelphia is a football town, and the Eagles were dreadful. We didn't know how many of those tickets would actually be used—who could know. JFK Stadium was a 100,000 seat stadium and when those crowds showed up the league couldn't believe it."

Wyatt also believed that there might have been some NFL espionage afoot in the situation.

"(Eagles' owner) Leonard Tose put a reporter up to go to city hall and to look up the actual attendance on what taxes were being paid," remembered Wyatt, "This was important to Tose because he was taking a beating in Philadelphia, and the WFL was using these figures to contact investors in other cities. Guys were peddling franchises by saying, 'Look how many people showed up in Jacksonville, and look at Philadelphia.'"

"Barry Leib basically did a good job," said John B. Kelly, "but he should brush up on his mathematics."

"The problem in Philadelphia was that they gave free tickets out and they lied about it," said Gary Davidson, "That was the first bad news we had. The Bell had a great opening day but they didn't tell the press that they had papered the house. No one would've cared, they could have said, 'We gave tickets away to the local high schools, the Salvation Army, the United Way, and youth programs, and we had 60,000 people,' that would have been a great story. But they misrepresented that to the press and it killed our credibility."

Like Watergate, the "Papergate" scandal brought down a president. John B. Kelly, who brought a sense of class to a classless situation, resigned as team President in a press conference at the Warwick Hotel.

"When the ticket scandal broke," explained Hugh Wyatt, "Kelly resigned from his position. I think he was embarrassed that the team had lied, and resigned to the fact that it was his mistake to shoulder the blame."

After dealing with an entire week of negative publicity, and their fans buzzing about "Papergate," the Bell had to try to concentrate and prepare to face the highly-regarded Memphis Southmen. Earlier in the week, Waller had claimed that the Southmen were "as good as some of the teams in the National Football League." But the Bell went out and proved itself where it's very hard to fake the numbers—on the field of play. With an announced crowd of 12,396 looking on at JFK, the Bell trounced Memphis, 46-15.

The game got off to an auspicious start when the recording of the National Anthem couldn't be found and was not played. Despite that hiccup, Philadelphia took command on the game's first play from scrimmage, a 64-yard touchdown on a screen pass from Corcoran to John Land, and went on to register its third victory in five outings. The win kept the Bell one game behind the Florida Blazers in the Eastern Division.

"That play in the first 23 seconds was a double-eye screen," explained Corcoran, "I worked on it in the minors at Harrisburg. Ron Waller told us we were going to score the first time we had the ball and it worked."

"We played a fine game on both offense and defense, and we did it against a team that ranks among the three best in the league," commented Waller. "We have a lot of respect for Memphis and I hope that more people will start respecting us after what we did to them."

The statistics told the true story of exactly what the Bell did to the Southmen. Philadelphia outgained the visitors, 422 yards to 116. The first half was even more one-sided, as Philadelphia had a 225 to 26 edge in total yardage while rolling to a 30-0 lead. Corcoran, who threw four touchdown passes, and reserve quarterback Frank DiMaggio, who added two more, combined for 290 yards through the air.

"They gave us the short passes and were rotating in their defensive backfield in a way that left a lot of openings," said Waller, explaining the Bell's success with the air game. "We knew that they had picked up some of our running tendencies, so we set up in these formations and passed from them instead. Our offense is always very flexible."

Waller also complimented his defense, which was ranked as the best in the WFL. "Our defense was just superb, we really controlled their offense," remarked the Bell coach, "In fact I think the officials gave Memphis those two touchdowns because they were both set up by interference calls which I didn't like."

Defensive end Skip Parmenter, who was named the game's top defensive player in a vote by the press, defensive tackle Tom Laputka, and linebacker Wally Dempsey were among the Bell standouts.

"This was by far our best performance," said Parmenter, a University of Massachusetts product who had failed trials with the Denver Broncos and

Cleveland Browns. "After we held their running game in the first half we were able to concentrate on our pass rush during the second half and we're all very pleased with the way we played in both areas."

"This team started late," added Dempsey, "It is a team of cast-offs and has-beens but there is a lot of talent here. I never played on a better defense. I would like to take on an NFL team."

After the game, John Land awarded the game ball to the press. "We worked our rears off all season and then we read we aren't a good team . . . it got to us. You psyched us. You won the game for us."

"This freebie stuff and the press saying we aren't a good team is baloney," said the ever loquacious Corcoran, "And we have something to prove to that guy in Chicago (Virgil Carter). He said we were lousy on TV."

The Bell was in Chicago a week later, facing the Fire. Chicago wide receiver Jack Dolbin, who had been with Corcoran and Waller in Pottstown, came back to haunt his old teammate and coach by catching a touchdown pass with 1:29 left to beat the Bell, 32-29.

The Bell tried to stage a comeback of its own, but wide receiver Mike Carter dropped a pass deep in Fire territory in the last minute, and then Corcoran had his last pass intercepted to end it.

"Yeah, he dropped it," said Waller of Carter, "Linzy Cole dropped a TD pass in the first quarter, and we missed two field goals but we hung in there against a team that had us outmanned. We damn near had it."

Next on the schedule was Southern California, and Corcoran had some choice words for Sun defensive tackle Dave Roller before the game. Roller was gaining a reputation as a cheap shot artist, and was coming off a game when he kicked Houston quarterback Mike Taliaferro in the head.

"If he takes any cheap shots at me, he's in deep trouble," warned the King, "I got a 6'8" Italian friend in Pottstown who takes care of me. If I give him the word, he'll visit Roller in Southern Cal and break his feet."

Sure enough, the first time Roller knocked the King down, Corcoran was up and screaming at the refs. Later in the game, Roller was flagged for roughing Corcoran.

The Bell led, 28-24 late in the game, but the Sun staged a late drive and scored with 32 seconds left to go ahead. A last second field goal try by Jerry Warren was blocked to ice the loss, one Ron Waller was not happy about.

"They don't know their ass from second base," Waller railed after the game, "These are minor league officials. I've seen better in the Atlantic Coast League. It was unbelievable." Waller was referring to two questionable calls by referee Bob Cooper, one a pass interference call on Benny Johnson, and the other an unsportsmanlike conduct whistle against linebacker Jeff Steinberger, which aided the winning drive by the Sun. "It's obviously jaded officiating," Waller continued his tirade, "They obviously figure Philadelphia's low man on the totem pole."

"I just gave that dude a slap on the shoulder," said Johnson on the call against him as he defended Dave Williams. "We weren't even in a bump-and-run, we were in a rollback defense."

"The referees in this league have something against this team," said John Land, "the coach or something. They killed us tonight."

So did injuries, as the Bell lost defensive back Frank Polito, wide receiver Linzy Cole, and cornerback Bill Craven for the year.

On August 26th, the Bell placed offensive lineman Dave Joyner and defensive back Marv Pettaway on waivers and signed defensive backs Bernie Chapman and Bryan Marshall, wide receiver Mike Bartik, defensive lineman Tommie Davis, and linebackers Gary Gray and John Phillips. By season's end, the Bell would turnover their roster by more than 50%.

One day later, the Bell signed former Eagles' linebacker Tim Rossovich. He was another addition to the Bell's cast of characters. Rossovich was a free spirit in the truest sense of the word. He liked to entertain his teammates by eating glass, setting himself on fire, and putting on Dracula capes and waiting to jump out at unsuspecting passers-by.

Rossovich continued his wild antics when he joined the Bell.

"Tommy Alteri, who was our trainer, would go around the morning of a game and give the players their vitamin B-12 shots," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "and he came up to me one day and said, 'Hugh, you'll never believe what I just saw. I went up to Rossovich's and Cash's room and they were naked on the bed, kissing.' Tim and Rick (Cash) had just done that to freak out Tommy—and it worked, he was never quite the same after that."

Nobody was immune from Rossovich's antics and pranks, not even the King himself.

"One day, King didn't want to park his car in the parking lot with the other players so he drove his car into the catacombs underneath JFK Stadium," remembered Wyatt, "We get on the plane and King comes up to me and says, 'I can't believe what those guys did. No class, no class at all. I can't believe it.' I

went to George Chatlos and asked him, 'What the hell is King talking about?' And Chatlos tells me that Tim Rossovich and Rick Cash spent all day walking around the parking lot all around South Philadelphia picking up dog shit and came back to King's car and smeared it all over the windshield of his White Lincoln with their bare hands."

Rossovich, the Eagles' top draft choice in 1968, was waived out of the NFL after being one of eight San Diego Chargers fined in 1973 for involvement with drugs. "He wasn't totally free of any of that activity," said his attorney, Dave Rudich, who claimed that Rossovich was blackballed by the NFL, "but more than half of the club was involved." Desperate for defensive help, Philadelphia made Rossovich the highest-paid defensive player in the WFL.

"I think his reputation far outweighed his ability on the field," said Hugh Wyatt, "I think the team liked him because he was a Philadelphia Eagle."

Playing with Rossovich leading a patchwork defense caused by the succession of injuries, the Bell outlasted Detroit, 27-23, improving their record to 4-and-4 before 15,100 people in JFK. Those 15,100 fans didn't realize at the time how close the game came to being cancelled. The Detroit players discovered as they entered the locker room that among other supplies, they had no tape for their ankles, and refused to play. The Bell either didn't have any extra supplies to loan to the Wheels, or wouldn't give the by now deadbeat franchise the supplies for free. At the last minute, the Wheels found some tape thanks to a generous Johnson & Johnson rep, and the game went on. The win kept Philly very much alive in the Eastern Division race. Rossovich and Gary Gray, an ex-Penn Stater also making his first start, sacked Bubba Wyche six times. Strong side safety Ed Hayes also got in some good hits. The Bell held the Wheels to 92 yards passing and also blocked two field goals. Philadelphia needed all the defense it could get as King Corcoran had a subpar night, throwing for only 184 yards and missing eight straight passes at one point.

One day after picking up ex-Eagles linebacker John Sodaski, the Bell faced the New York Stars in Week Nine, and watched as New York built a 21-8 lead at the intermission and then switched to their ground game in stopping the Bell, 24-16.

Corcoran tried to pass his team back into contention but had five passes intercepted, three of them in the third quarter. Bell Coach Ron Waller was not amused.

"We should have run the ball more in the third quarter," said Waller. "We could have won the game right then. King threw too much. I've seen Corcoran a lot," added Waller. "He must have had worse days but this was bad."

Corcoran disagreed. "I felt the best I have in two weeks, since I hurt my arm against Southern California," he said, "Three of those interceptions came when the receiver came back and said he could beat his man. This probably means we can't win the championship." New York stopped John Land and Claude Watts cold, holding them to 40 yards rushing total.

The Bell had fallen to 4-and-5, two games behind both New York and Florida in the standings. Corcoran hit Watts with a six-yard touchdown pass and Jimmy Joe ran nine yards for the other Philadelphia TD, but it was not enough.

Just three days later, the Bell was back on the field in Jacksonville. The Bell seemed to have the game in hand as they were toying with the Sharks early, building a 23-11 edge, with two of their touchdowns coming on blocked field goal returns. But the snake-bit Bell, which had lost three of their last four games in the final minutes, got shark-bit as well as Jacksonville rallied to defeat them 34-30.

"When you get around 400 yards on you passing, you must be doing something wrong," said Ron Waller, "The secondary looked like they were asleep to me all night."

The kicking game looked like it was snoozing as well as Jerry Warren missed two field goal tries and could only watch as a third attempt was botched by a high snap that holder Ron Holliday couldn't corral. "We should have made those," was all Waller said.

The defensive struggles had Waller busy moving more and more bodies, both on and off the roster. Gone were defensive linemen Dale Mize, Tommie Davis, James Jackson and Skip Williams; and linebacker Mike Riley. Warren, who had missed the two field goals against the Sharks, also found himself on waivers. Added to the mix were NFL veteran defensive tackle Steve Chomyszak, as well as defensive linemen Len Pettigrew and Bob Thomson, and linebacker Jon Knoble. Defensive backs Bryan Marshall and Mike Shaw were re-signed, and kicker Dan Torzala, cut loose by the Redskins, was signed to replace Warren. It's little wonder that most of the Bell players went without their names on their jerseys, seeing as how quickly as they moved on and off—and back on in some cases—the roster.

"We have what we call the 'revolving door policy,'" said Vince Papale, "A guy makes one bad play and he could be out on his ear. And when the NFL started

waiving its players, we had 'em coming and going. You meet a lot of people that way."

Six days after losing to Jacksonville, the Bell hosted the Sharks in JFK. It was one of the wildest games in the WFL. With most of the 7,230 fans already gone, the Bell finally beat the Sharks, 41-22, in overtime, in a game that didn't end until 12:45am. Thanks to another event held at JFK—this time the American Gold Cup, a horse-racing steeple-chase competition—the field again looked like the landscape of the moon.

The Bell blew a 22-8 lead, with new kicker Torzala—cut by the Redskins the week before—being of little help, missing four of five field goal tries.

"He sure stunk, didn't he?" asked Waller, never one to mince words, after the game.

The two teams put the ball in the air an incredible 115 times during the 4 hour and 35 minute marathon, prompting Line Judge Bill Wright to say, "What have they got against just running the ball? I've never seen two teams throw as much."

The WFL's rule of playing an entire 15-minute overtime period instead of the usual sudden death version preferred in the NFL did not sit well with some of the participants. "With all respect to the WFL," said Waller, a comment usually followed by a fine from the league office, "I think it's kinda dumb to play a whole quarter of overtime. If one team scores, they should give the other team the opportunity to score and that's it. The players were tired, I was tired."

With 4:50 gone in overtime, Torzala finally hit on a field goal, a 26-yarder, to put the Bell up 25-22. Claude Watts capped a 58-yard drive with a 3-yard scoring run, and then linebacker John Sodaski intercepted a Reggie Oliver pass and took it all the way back for another touchdown and the 41-22 final.

"This is gonna cut me down from a case of beer to half a case," said defensive back Ron Mabra, who scored on an 84-yard punt return, on the late ending.

The sparse crowd was the lowest turnout of the season for Philadelphia. "I can't lose $4-million and not recoup," said an obviously agitated John Bosacco, "If I did I'd just be another 29-year-old."

In Orlando on September 18th, the Bell lost 24-21 with 17 seconds left on a touchdown pass over rookie defensive back Zaven Yaralian. "I thought we had it won," said Rossovich, who had been taken out of the game for an extra defensive back.

"On the winning drive, we were in our Frank defense," growled an obviously agitated Waller, who coached the game from the press box, "It looked like our man (Yaralian) went for the ball too soon and missed it. With five defensive backs, the strong safety rotates to the tight end side of the field." Waller was upset because tight end Greg Latta caught the winning touchdown pass.

Corcoran completed 18 of 28 passes for 216 yards, but his four interceptions did not sit too well with Waller, either. "If he had dumped those passes off to the side we would have won. Instead he goes for the bomb," Waller grumbled.

After the game, the Bell signed quarterback Sonny Sixkiller, the full-blooded Cherokee from the University of Washington. Sixkiller had enjoyed a legendary career with the Huskies, and had become something of a folk hero. But his folk hero status didn't help his career. He went undrafted by the NFL and had an unsuccessful trial with the Rams. Los Angeles already had James Harris, John Hadl and Ron Jaworski, and as Sixkiller himself said, "I knew the writing was on the wall." He tried the CFL and spent a little time in Toronto. He also found time to have a small role in the Burt Reynolds' movie, "The Longest Yard." Sixkiller played a halfback on the inmate team that took on the guards, and spent 10 weeks in shooting.

"When you're inside the prison shooting action, seeing the prison population day in and day out, it made you really glad you're on the outside," said Sixkiller. "The conditions in Georgia were tough, but it was a tremendous experience."

According to Hugh Wyatt, the smallish signal-caller was the last thing the Bell needed.

"We were bringing in Sonny Sixkiller, a five-foot-ten quarterback, and we really didn't need him," said the Bell's Director of Player Personnel, "We already had Corcoran, Frank DiMaggio and Mike Yancheff and didn't need another five-foot-ten quarterback."

In Honolulu on the 25th, Jerry Warren, placed on waivers by the Bell a little over two weeks earlier, which had become a common fate for any Bell kicker, came back and kicked two field goals to give Philadelphia a 21-16 win over The Hawaiians.

Put on the waiver list after missing two field goals in the 34-30 loss to Jacksonville on September 5th, Warren went unclaimed and the Bell, who had used seemingly everybody they could find in an attempt to kick successful field goals, brought him back after several other kickers were found wanting. Both of Warren's field goals came in the last quarter. One was set up by an interception by Ron Mabra, who picked off two in the game.

Before the Bell faced Florida at home, Ron Waller once again made wholesale changes to his roster, adding defensive backs Rudy Redmond and Don

Vallery, outside linebacker Bill Peterson, offensive linemen Frank Gallagher and Bill Ellenbogen, defensive end Rick Cash, and wide receiver Willie Franklin.

King Corcoran had another bad night as Sonny Sixkiller, being groomed for a roster spot in '75, watched from the sidelines. The King hit on only 9 of 24 passes, and before the fans knew it, Florida led 15-0. The Blazers went on to whip the Bell easily, 30-7, before a sparse gathering of 7,150 in JFK.

"We got outhit by a good football team,' said Waller.

"They plain outhit us," echoed the King, "They were too tough for us."

Philadelphia's record dropped to 6-and-8, three games behind Charlotte and four games behind Florida. But the Bell players were still confident they could turn things around.

"We're not out of this yet," said Vince Papale, "If we can win five of our six remaining games we could get into the playoffs as the 'wild card' team."

Bell owner John Bosacco claimed that he and Eagles' owner Leonard Tose were good friends. But that did not stop the two sides from squabbling in the press and in the courts.

In early October, the Bell filed an anti-trust suit against the NFL Eagles, seeking permission to use Veterans' Stadium and charging that Tose conspired with Mayor Frank Rizzo and other city officials to give the Eagles a monopoly in Philadelphia. The Bell claimed "it must have access to a stadium . . . which is suitable for playing major league football." The suit asked for an unspecified amount of damages for alleged violations which had hurt the Bell's business and was seeking to stop Tose and city officials from committing any further alleged monopolizing actions.

Tose all but laughed about the lawsuit.

"Hey I didn't even draw up this lease," Tose said, "That lease was drawn up by (Jerry) Wolman (the former Eagles' owner). I inherited this lease.

"Listen," Tose went on, "Rizzo was a cop when this lease was made."

Tose pointed out that the Bell schedule ran for 14 weeks of the baseball season, and then snapped, "Why don't they do anything with baseball?"

Tose once decided to "drop in" on a Bell practice session. "That Len Tose has some nerve," said wide receiver Vince Papale, "We're practicing at JFK and Tose lands his helicopter right on our field. All the guys were shaking their fists at him. (Tim) Rossovich went wild. I thought he was going to run up and eat the helicopter."

"I remember the Mayor telling Eagles owner Leonard Tose, 'Don't worry, those guys won't be in this city long,'" recalled John Land, "We tried to rent Veterans Stadium and the city wouldn't rent it to us. The Bell ended up paying more rent than the Eagles did for Veterans Stadium. The media used stuff to hurt or slander us. They were telling us, 'The Eagles are the team here and you guys aren't gonna be around long.' These were indicators that we were up against the establishment."

On October 9th, the Bell hosted The Hawaiians before an estimated 4,900 people, the smallest crowd of the season. Ron Waller, disappointed and disgusted, said facetiously after the game, "How many were here—500 people? We drew more than that in Pottstown!"

On top of that, the team lost to The Hawaiians, 25-22, when they gave up a touchdown with 2:45 to play. Corcoran led the team to The Hawaiians' 28-yard line late in the game, but when the Bell tried a field goal with time running out, the snap from center was fumbled by holder Ron Holliday, who was promptly buried by Hawaiians' defenders.

"Same thing, another lousy performance," said Waller, "Why it was, I don't know. It's the second week in a row, too." Corcoran pitched a couple interceptions and was yanked by Waller for Mike Yancheff, who wound up throwing another pick.

A week later, team Publicist Bob Ellis attempted to sound like Jim Cantore of The Weather Channel when he spoke to the press and tried to explain the reason the Bell drew only 750 people—you read that right, *750 people*—for a game against Shreveport on the 16th of October. Ellis said 24 hours of rain before the game and then intermittent showers during the contest kept the crowd to the smallest of the Wiffle season (and possibly the smallest in the history of pro football).

"Neither wire service account of the game said anything about the rain," Ellis said, "I know we haven't been exactly filling JFK [*that's for sure, even when they tried to fudge the numbers*], but not to mention the weather isn't reporting all the circumstances."

"I don't know if it was the World Series, the weather, or what," said John Land, "But that's the smallest crowd that I can ever remember playing in front of."

The rain made the field an incredibly sloppy mess. When asked if he'd ever seen a poorer playing surface, Waller responded, "It was in Pittsburgh at old Forbes Field in 1956."

Norm MacLean wrote in the *Pro Football Weekly* and it was the type of field "that shouldn't happen to a dog."

Waller, however, did not blame the muddy field for the loss.

"Mistakes again," Waller said, "Claude Watts fumbles, they score. Marv Pettaway fumbles that punt and they score. We stopped them on third and long. They score on fourth. We drive to the six-yard line and Willie Franklin goes in motion. We seem to put pressure on ourselves."

The mistakes had Waller combing the waiver wire again. This time the coach / GM cleaned house in his defensive backfield, dumping Marv Pettaway and Ed Hayes and adding Willie Germany and Benny Johnson.

The next night, October 23rd, the Bell trailed Southern California 7-0 at halftime, but then exploded for six touchdowns in the second half to bury the Sun, 45-7 and snap Southern California's seven-game winning streak. King Corcoran was the star of the night with three touchdown passes and a touchdown run, but after the game, he gave out game balls to defensive end Skip Parmenter (who returned a fumble 25 yards for a score), running back John Land (84 yards rushing to go over 1,000 yards for the season) and team owner John Bosacco.

"He's a super owner," said the King, "He stuck with us from the beginning. Never missed a payday. And this team is here to stay."

But not in JFK they weren't. After a 37-31 win over Chicago on October 30th, the Bell discovered it had no place to play. "Our lease (for JFK Stadium) terminated with our last home game," announced Bosacco. "We've been ordered to vacate the locker rooms." The Bell, which also practiced at Kennedy, was able to secure the use of the field at Southern High School for its practices, but if the Bell happened to make the WFL playoffs, they'd have to play on the road. "We had been under the impression that the lease was good until we were finished playing football," explained Bosacco. Asked who had signed such a lease, Bosacco replied "I would rather not say. But I can assure you that it wasn't me."

"We'd rather play on the road," said Waller, "You play to the surroundings. You go to a place like Anaheim with a beautiful plan and it's different than here with a small crowd and a depressing stadium, the same place you practice in. I know it depresses me.

"Before I came here," Waller went on, "I thought it was a big stadium with a large viewing area. They kept telling me no one would come out to see a game here. Well, this year made a believer out of me. Unless you give tickets away [*ouch, burn!*], no one will."

That still seemed to be the case at JFK. The team announced a crowd of 12,500 for the game against Chicago, but it turned out that only half of those paid to get in. Reporters who interviewed fans, however, could find no one who paid for their seat.

The Bell fashioned two comebacks and a wild fourth quarter to overcome the Fire. "We almost made up the game plan as we went along," said Waller, "When we tried that in California last week we got 40 points in the second half."

The Bell improvised its way to 490 yards in total offense, with the King contributing 349 of those on 20 completions in 34 attempts. Corcoran had three touchdown passes and John Land ran in from three yards out to finally win it with 1:10 left on the clock.

As the calendar flipped to November, news from around the league was not good. Teams were moving, folding or experiencing financial difficulties. When asked if the Bell would stay in Philadelphia if the Wiffle came back in 1975, Bosacco replied: "That's hard to say. You're torn between two desires. There's the emotional desire to stay in Philadelphia, and then there's the practical desire not to go broke. Our losses this year will approach $2 million."

"We all believed that things would work out," said Hugh Wyatt, "We believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. That rich Arabs were coming into the WFL to bail us out. Many of the players were just hanging in there, many because of the contract flim-flamming that was going on. See, at the end of the first game these guys had money comin' to them. If a player signed a $20,000 contract, then after the first game a guy was owed $1,000. But the players were told that they would be paid on a monthly basis. So, after playing four games and expecting $4,000, these guys would get paid 1/12th of their pay, or $1,800. The extra $2,200 was to be put in an "escrow account," like the social security fund, and that never materialized. Finally, the word got around that if a player got cut he would get his money. These guys were meaner than snakes and they would go into the front office and this little old lady would write them a check for the rest of their pay. Then, management asked me to tell these guys that they had to sign a payment schedule. It was crazy. These guys would be staring at me saying, 'I want my f#$%in' money! I want my f%&*in' money now!'"

Wyatt tried to make light of the situation.

"Carl Cherkin and I thought that the Arab oil money rumors were hilarious," recalled Wyatt, "so one day we got on the plane with the burnooses on, and he and I got some scarves to wear around our heads and some of those Groucho Marx eye glasses with the big nose and we got on the plane and boy, was Ron Waller pissed off. He couldn't believe someone would make light of the situation—the look he gave us."

Homeless, the Bell traveled to Birmingham to face the Americans. Tim Rossovich introduced himself to the Birmingham faithful in a rather unique way.

"We played down in Birmingham, Alabama," recalled Hugh Wyatt, "Those fans were rabid, we drew a good crowd 25,000–30,000. The noise those people made was almost terrifying. Legion Field has all steel bleachers, and when the fans began to stomp their feet, it sounded like a freight train roaring through a thunderstorm. The team was prepared for the crowds because as you went into the locker rooms at the end of the field there was a chain-link fence about 15 feet high that separated the field from the fans and the fans were screaming and hollering at us, it was incredible, they didn't know anything about us. Well, Rossovich is walking out of the dressing room . . . very calmly, very calmly, very calmly. Suddenly, he turned, and SHREIKED and he leaped 10 feet up on to the fence, and started shaking the fence and screaming at those people! I'll never forget how they scattered in all directions. He looked liked some crazed ape up there screaming and hollering."

Rossovich's antics did nothing to inspire the Bell as Birmingham built a 26-0 halftime lead. But the Bell refused to quit and King Corcoran threw two touchdown passes and Claude Watts ran for another as the Bell clawed their way back to 26-23. Philadelphia desperately tried to regain possession near the end of the game, but Birmingham's Matthew Reed deliberately fell to the ground with 17 seconds left to try to kill the clock. A brawl between Reed and the entire Bell defense broke out and soon both benches had emptied and players spent the next five minutes punching and flailing at each other.

Philadelphia had one last game on their schedule, but when Chicago owner Tom Origer refused to play the game against the Bell, Philadelphia won by forfeit. According to Hugh Wyatt, this news did not sit too well with King Corcoran.

"The Bell was scheduled to play the Chicago Fire," said Wyatt, "and 'King' had a clause in his contract that would pay him a $5,000 bonus if he threw for a certain amount of yards. And then Tom Origer announced that the Fire weren't coming to Philly and that they would forfeit the game. King comes running into the room in a panic saying, 'You gotta find us somebody to play, anybody!!' He wanted to make his incentive, but it wasn't going to happen. You should've seen the look on his face—he couldn't believe it."

Despite not playing the last game, Corcoran led the league in attempts (546), completions (280), and touchdown passes (31), and was second in yardage (3,362). Unfortunately, he also led the WFL in interceptions with 30. Incredibly, considering the amount of times he dropped back to pass, Corcoran was only sacked 19 times. His old Pottstown teammates, John Land, with 1,136 yards, and Claude Watts, with 927, formed a potent 1-2 rushing attack, and also combined for 100 receptions that gained 1,205 yards and 13 touchdowns. Watts finished with 18 touchdowns and 126 points.

The team had been inconsistent but also exciting and entertaining. "We're not a very conventional team," Waller had said during the season. "People come to our games to be entertained. We don't put you to sleep like the Miami Dolphins do." Between Waller's wild and crazy offense, King Corcoran, Papergate, Leonard Tose and Frank Rizzo, Tim Rossovich, and the team using no less than 11 players as placekickers or punters, it had been a fascinating year in the City of Brotherly Love.

And although the team had finished with a record of 9-and-11, it had actually made the playoffs, and was originally scheduled to play in Birmingham in the first round. But when Charlotte was unable to host a game due to lack of ticket sales, the Wiffle had to alter their playoff system. The Bell was then told to head to Orlando instead to play Florida in the first round.

In a season's worth of uncertainty and last-minute changes, the Bell players just shrugged their shoulders and headed to Florida.

CHAPTER 14

A Less Than Perfect Storm

The Portland Storm, 1974

"Don't ask me why, but men facing disaster always get witty. You make jokes or you go crazy."

—BEN DAVIDSON, Portland Storm defensive end

Like so many other franchises in the WFL, Portland's entry got off to a troubled and troubling start. When Gary Davidson announced that there was a "new game in town" in October of 1973, Portland was not among the franchises. In fact, it wasn't even listed as a city under consideration for a team.

The original teams rattled off by Davidson at that press conference in the early fall of '73 included one in New York. But that franchise suddenly became homeless in February of 1974 when the Boston team decided to move from Beantown to the Big Apple. The original college draft picks of the New York team were then relegated to this still unlocated and unnamed franchise.

On February 18th, the Wiffle announced that this original New York franchise would set up shop in one of four locations: Portland, Salt Lake City, New Orleans or Mexico City.

The franchise remained in limbo, however, until a Houston accountant named John Rooney entered the picture. He planned on placing the team in the Pacific Northwest, an untapped region for pro football, and chose Portland for a home base.

Portland, a city of around 380,000 people, had a checkered football history, mostly in the low minor leagues. The Thunderbirds played in the North Pacific League in 1963 and '64, and then dropped out in 1965. They gave it another try in 1966, but the team, and the league, lasted just that season. In 1969, the Loggers played in the Continental Football league, but after a 3-and-9 record and a last place finish in the league's Pacific Division, the Loggers folded up their tents.

The city was better known as one of the first areas in the country to embrace soccer, and it was huge there. The city had minor-league baseball and hockey, and the NBA Trail Blazers, but the Blazers hadn't caught on with the locals yet since Bill Walton was still at UCLA. Football was really not on the city's radar.

Despite the fact that the city seemed to have little interest in the game, Rooney was undaunted. In March of '74, he announced that he had signed Ralph Goldston, an assistant coach at the University of Colorado, as the team's head coach. This announcement made the headlines as Goldston was African-American, and he would have been the first black head coach in pro football since Fritz Pollard in the 20s. "I don't want to make a big deal out of that," Rooney said, "Ralph is a fine coach and he comes highly recommended. He just happens to be black." Goldston had been the offensive backfield coach under Eddie Crowder and said he would coach a wide open offense with multiple sets. He and Rooney also said they were going to make a pitch to Arizona State running back Woody Green, who had played high school ball in Portland.

But it all quickly fell apart. The league announced that Rooney could not complete his financing and said he was out. Rooney countered by threatening to sue Gary Davidson and the league. He claimed that he had put up a down-payment of $75,000 for the team and given it to Davidson. The commissioner in turn claimed that Rooney was not the official owner of the team.

The franchise stayed hung in limbo until late March. Then Bruce Gelker, a former football player and owner of several Saddleback Inns, moved into

the picture. Davidson had earlier approached Gelker about possibly investing in the Philadelphia franchise, but Gelker, with no ties to the East Coast, balked at the idea. He did, however, like the thought of owning a team on the West Coast. Since many of his Saddleback Inns were located in Oregon, Gelker, who often traveled there for a little R & R, was interested in putting money into a Portland franchise. He agreed to put up $700,000 and was named the new owner of the fledgling team. So now Rooney was out and Gelker was in.

Rooney, meanwhile, besides being ousted as owner, was also being sued by Goldston who claimed he had in his possession a valid contract to be the Portland head coach. But because of the change in ownership, the league said the contract was not valid. All this legal wrangling certainly tempered any enthusiasm that might have been generated about Portland getting a franchise.

Now that Portland had a franchise, it needed a place to play. Civic Stadium was available, but was small and had been built in 1926 into the side of a hill. Its main purpose was for soccer games, and it sat roughly 33,000 people. The stadium was in the city and parking was a nightmare. The team had no other alternatives, however, so the stadium authorities knew they pretty much had the team over a barrel and had them sign what turned out to be a terrible lease agreement.

The Storm hired Ron Mix, a Pro Football Hall of Famer, as General Manager on April 16th. Mix had ended his career with the Raiders in 1972, finished law school, and was working as the legal counsel for the San Diego Chargers.

After Mix took the job in Portland, San Diego Chargers' owner Gene Klein called the United States Attorney General's office to complain that Mix was guilty of several crimes, claiming that Mix had taken scouting files with him. Klein's claims were probably leftover bad feelings from when Mix, who had originally planned to retire from the Chargers in 1969, had been lured out of retirement to play for Al Davis and the Raiders. This upset Klein so much, that he had Mix's number 74, which the team had retired in his honor, put back into circulation.

No charges were ever filed against Mix.

Dick Coury, an NFL assistant with the Denver Broncos, was named head coach after the Goldston fiasco.

In early June, the franchise made a 5-year $1-million offer to Patriots' quarterback Jim Plunkett. Mix and Gelker had a conference call with Plunkett's attorney, Wayne Hooper of Oakland, to discuss terms. Plunkett's contract with the Patriots had two years remaining on it, meaning the quarterback would not be available to play with Portland until 1977. This did not deter the Storm.

"This is consistent with the date we would hope to open a new 65,000-seat stadium in Portland," said Mix. In the end, neither Plunkett, nor a new stadium, ever saw the light of day in Portland.

Before the season even began, Gelker had started to run into money problems. Like so many others in the WFL, Gelker was not financially substantial enough to run a pro football team. A Portland attorney, Richard Bayless, agreed to become a minority investor but that wasn't enough. Finally, a Canadian businessman named Robert Harris, heading a group of 11 investors from London, Ontario, bought controlling interest in the team. Gelker stayed on as team president.

Because of all the changes in ownership, the franchise shifting from city to city, and the legal problems, the Storm was the last WFL team to be organized, and got quite a late start in signing players. At one point, while other WFL teams had over a hundred players under contract, Portland had only 35 players signed, quite a few of them rookies. Among the few standouts were running back Rufus "Roadrunner" Ferguson, ex-CFL and Detroit Lion quarterback Greg Barton, ex-Ram defensive back Clancy Williams, ex-Cardinals' defensive lineman Sam Silas, and defensive end Bruce Bergey, brother of Cincinnati Bengals and Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Bill Bergey.

The Birth of "MartyBall." . . .

One of the Storm's linebackers had worked in real estate for the last three years, selling homes in Denver and Miami. He had retired from pro football in 1971 but like many former players had a strong desire to return to the game. So, in 1974, at 30 years of age, figuring he had a little left in the tank, and wanting to give the game one last shot, he signed on with Portland. Coach Dick Coury said the veteran "has had an outstanding pro career in the NFL, and gives us great leadership at linebacker . . . he will lead the younger linebackers, by example and by advice." He opened the season with the Storm, but suffered a shoulder injury that ended his playing days. Instead of leaving, he decided to stick around and coached the Storm linebackers for the rest of the season. In 1975, he landed a job coaching the linebackers with the New York Giants, and

the rest is history. Marty Schottenheimer, thanks indirectly to an injury suffered while playing for the Wiffle that allowed him to get his foot in the door as a pro coach, was on his way to becoming one of the best coaches in the NFL. One wonders if he ever told his players with the Storm: "There's a gleam gentlemen! There's a gleam!"

The Storm opened the 1974 campaign in Philadelphia. "Our first game was an away game in Philadelphia," Ron Mix told wflnation.com recently, "and my wife traveled with me with the team to go to that game and the stadium was absolutely packed. I told her, 'Oh my gosh, it looks like we made the right decision.' And then later we found out that the team ownership had papered the house by about 40,000 free tickets to people. So I remember how disappointed we were to learn that. Then of course there were just attendance problems throughout the year by all teams."

Portland was burned for 22 points in the second quarter and could not catch up. "Portland was playing a basic zone and giving up the short pass," offered former Eagle and present TV broadcaster Irv Cross, "I don't know why they ran the zone because [*Philadelphia quarterback King*] Corcoran never threw deep in his life. But he will nickel and dime you to death."

Corcoran riddled the Portland secondary and the Bell's wild-and-crazy formations seemed to confuse the Storm. "They hurt us with those and we weren't ready for them," said assistant coach Ron Siegrist, "The quick short passes hurt us because we were in a zone. We hurt ourselves and should have been in man-to-man coverage."

Quarterback Greg Barton had two sure touchdown passes dropped. He hit on only 4 of 16 passes, and overall the Portland attack was anemic, recording just 10 first downs and gaining only 146 yards in offense.

In Week Two in Memphis, Portland, according to head coach Dick Coury, was "100 percent better in every phase" of the game, but still lost to the Southmen, 16-8.

"Memphis played good football but so did we," said Coury, adding that a big difference was the play of four new starters on defense—defensive backs Phil Borjas and Tom Oberg and linebackers Bob Schmit and Clyde Warehime. "All four gave us an excellent effort and helped our defense show more poise," Coury went on to say, "We came to life tonight."

But not enough to avoid their second straight loss to open the season. Portland fell behind but tied the game up at 8-8 on Barton's 29-yard touchdown pass to rookie Sam Dickerson with 6:07 left in the third quarter.

"We didn't do anything special for Memphis offensively," said Dickerson, who impressed everyone with 4 catches for 98 yards, "We just did everything better. Remember, last week was the first time we lined up against anybody."

Late in the fourth quarter, the Storm stopped Memphis on a fourth-and-one play on its own 12, and then promptly marched to the Southmen 39. But Barton was sacked for a 10-yard loss, and then Clem Turner fumbled at the end of a 17-yard run. Memphis recovered to end Portland's last threat.

After losing their first two games on the road, the Storm opened their home season before 19,358 fans. Prior to the game, Gary Davidson presented Oregon Governor Harold Baines with a WFL football during a ceremony at midfield. The Storm then opened the scoring with an 18-yard touchdown pass from Greg Barton to rookie wide receiver Greg Specht from Oregon. But that was pretty much the extent of the celebrations as the Storm lost to Chicago, 29-22.

Mistakes crippled the offense as the Storm lost three fumbles and an interception. "We just have to get it together," said Dick Coury, "We can't play defense one week and offense the next week. Damn, 22 points should be enough to win in football.

"We gave up some cheap touchdowns, like that last one," Coury lamented, "The safety tried for the interception instead of playing it safe."

Rufus Ferguson impressed both coaches by running back two kickoffs for 41 and 66 yards, the second one setting up the Storm's second touchdown.

The Storm lost their fourth straight game and second in a row at home as the Philadelphia Bell routed them, 25-7 before just 13,757 fans in Civic Stadium.

Portland's attack fizzled again like it did in its previous games, and the mistake-prone Storm killed themselves with errors and turnovers. Just like in their previous meeting, King Corcoran once again shredded the Portland defense, this time for 18 completions, 182 yards and a pair of touchdowns. The team also lost its top receiver, Greg Specht, who had caught 14 passes so far, for six to eight weeks with a broken wrist.

"We just got our fannies beat—offensively defensively and in kicking," said Coury, "Everyone is trying so hard to get a win, they are pressing too much. The pressing hurts in our consistency."

If the Storm was consistent, it was in their utter inconsistency. Five turnovers, untimely penalties, a blocked punt and other mistakes botched Portland

again. One time it was a man in motion colliding with quarterback Greg Barton that killed a drive. Coury's penchant for moving personnel around was not helping either, but he promised that would stop. "We're down to what we'll go with," the coach said, then added, "We're going to stick together and get things ironed out."

Despite Coury's promise, Portland added two new players, linebacker Steve Brown and defensive back Ray Jones.

The winless Storm next faced the equally inept Houston Texans, who had scored just 21 points in their first four games. In an effort to shake up his struggling offense, Coury benched Barton in favor of the recently activated Ken Johnson, a rookie from Colorado who had broken a finger in training camp. Johnson paid immediate dividends by whipping a 15-yard scoring pass to Sam Dickerson with 13 seconds left in overtime to salvage a 15-15 tie with the Texans.

It was the Wiffle's first overtime game, and 15,686 fans in Civic Stadium were a witness to history, although some of them got up and left when regulation time ended. The two teams were tied 8-8 at the end of regulation and each scored a touchdown—and failed to score the action point—in the extra frame.

Johnson was able to move the club on occasion, seemed to be cool under fire and better still did not turn the ball over. Coury put Barton in at the beginning of overtime but he missed on 3 of his 4 passing attempts. "We put Greg in to see if we could get a spurt going," said Coury. With the crowd chanting, "We want Johnson, we want Johnson," Coury re-inserted the rookie. After the game, the coach was asked if the crowd influenced him. "No," Coury answered, "It was our plan to go with him anyway."

Houston scored in overtime to go up 15-8—at which time even more fans left, thinking it was *sudden death* overtime—but Portland marched 72 yards in seven plays as Johnson ran the two-minute offense to perfection. "Kenny couldn't have played any better than he did on that drive," said Coury. Finally, with 13 seconds left, Johnson connected with Sam Dickerson to tie it up, 15-all. Johnson, who had found success with rollouts during the game, tried to run it in for the action point but was stopped short.

Houston had eight seconds left, and tried a bomb from its own 28-yard line. But defensive back John Hughes, who had set up the Storm's first touchdown with a scintillating 59-yard punt return, intercepted the ball and returned it all the way to the Houston 39. As he was tackled a flag flew in and the Texans were whistled for piling on.

The officials then ended the game, but Coury argued, and rightly so, that a game cannot end on a defensive penalty. Several players had to restrain an incensed Coury as he railed at the officials.

"There is no way a game can end that way," said Coury, before he decided to file a protest with the league office, "We may not win it, but we want the officials to know they made a wrong decision. They might say they ruled a dead ball but that is not the ruling they gave us."

On the eve of Portland's next game in New York, the CFL brought a suit against the Storm and their starting safety, Tom Oberg, claiming that Oberg was still under contract to the CFL's Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

Oberg's attorney asked for more time to submit further memorandums and Circuit Court Judge Berkeley Lent granted the request.

Searching for that first win, Portland continued to search for players who might help them, this time picking up defensive end Ben Mayes on waivers from Jacksonville.

"We simply do not have a very good football team," said Dick Coury when asked about his 0-4-1 team, "and we're not improving."

"I think the problem was the Portland franchise started later than the other teams and the signing of players," GM Ron Mix told wflnation.com in a recent interview, "So I think we were at a handicap and it took us a while to bring in the bodies, then it took a while for Dick Coury to educate them properly so he could form them into a team."

In New York, the Storm proved Coury right—they weren't improving. In a one-sided game, Portland didn't score until the last two minutes and lost to the Stars, 38-16.

Ken Johnson started but left the game early with a badly bruised shoulder. Greg Barton came on in relief and threw two touchdown passes, but by that time New York led, 38-0. Portland returned to its bumbling ways, turning the ball over three times, including a fumbled punt by Darrell Mitchell in the first quarter that set up New York's first touchdown.

Besides Johnson, defensive end Bruce Bergey also was injured and missed most of the game.

Still winless, Portland flew to Orlando, and when they flew out after the game, they were still winless. The Storm managed only 10 first downs and 227 yards in total offense and turned the ball over three times and lost to the Blazers, 11-7. "We just can't seem to win that first one," said Coury.

A fumble by Marv Kendricks at his own 28 set up Florida's first touchdown. Late in the third quarter, however, a Florida turnover—an interception by Charles Hinton at the Florida 26—set up Portland to finally find the end zone. Johnson carried it in from a yard out with 9:52 left, but on the action point his pass intended for Jim Krieg was picked off, keeping Portland a point behind, 8-7.

Florida took the ensuing kickoff and drove all the way to the Portland 8-yard line, from where the Blazers clinched it with a field goal.

Portland had a couple more chances but Kendricks fumbled to end the first chance and then the Storm failed on a fourth down play to kill the other one.

"I thought our defense played the best it has all year," said Coury, "I thought we played well enough to win. In fact, we played the best team in the league an even game." Even, perhaps, but still short on the scoreboard.

In Anaheim a week later, the Storm were crushed 45-15 by Southern California to see their record drop to 0-7-1. Earl Gutskey wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that the Storm was "possibly America's worst pro football team." Few people would argue the point as the Storm certainly looked the part against the Sun. Portland trailed 37-7 at the half. They amassed only 15 first downs and just 219 yards in total offense, and turned the ball over twice.

The rushing game was one of the worst in the league, and the team's unsettled quarterback situation didn't help matters either. Youngsters Barton, Johnson and Don Van Galder had hit on only 47% of their passes and had only 8 touchdowns passes and 14 interceptions. Barton in fact had been dangled as trade bait to several other WFL clubs. The defense was near the bottom of the league in every category. The entire defensive backfield had been re-tooled, too, as Clancy Williams was shipped to Florida, rookie Ed Washington from Long Beach State was waived, and both rookie safeties, Charles Hinton and Ray Sherman, were replaced in the starting lineup by Tom Oberg and Frank Andruski, a pair of Canadian League vets. Oberg was then placed on waivers two days before the loss to Southern California. Only rookie Ed Bishop was still in the starting lineup, but he had been moved to safety.

And as if head coach Dick Coury didn't have enough to worry about, it seemed like owner Robert Harris was preparing to put his two cents worth in.

"I don't understand why none of the WFL coaches are taking advantage of the man-in-motion rules," said Harris, a one-time semi-pro coach, "It must be that American coaches aren't used to it. I've impressed upon my coaching staff I'd like to see some of these things. I hope Dick will do it soon.

"If we don't win a few games soon," Harris continued, "I may take a stronger interest in what's happening on the field. I think Dick's assistants lack pro experience. I think they're used to having the best material and not having to make do with lesser talent. They've got to innovate."

When asked if Coury's job was in jeopardy, Harris replied, "Dick is a fine man. I think he's prepared to listen to my suggestions." Just what any coach needed, an owner thinking he's the second coming of Paul Brown looking over his shoulder.

Much to Coury's relief, the Storm finally won their first game on Labor Day when they beat Detroit. Originally a Wheels home game, the contest was moved to London. No, not London, England; London, Ontario. The move was orchestrated by Harris, a native of London who wanted to place a WFL franchise there in 1976. Scheduled to play the winless and nearly bankrupt Wheels, who were 0-and-8, in Ypsilanti, Michigan, Harris offered the Wheels a $30,000 payday to move the game across the border to his hometown of London and the aptly named Little Stadium, which had a capacity of 11,000. The game was dubbed "The Battle of the Beaten" by sportswriters. The move did not go over well, and the game couldn't outdraw a backyard barbeque in London. WFL Vice President for Public Relations Don Andersen had to admit that, "It wasn't a very good idea." Nooo, really?!?!

The attendance was announced as 5,105 but observers put the figure closer to 2,000, which would have made it the smallest crowd in the short history of the league.

"We'd expected twice this many," said Harris, "But we didn't have time to promote it properly and the weather [*cloudy with intermittent showers*] hurt too."

What few fans were there in attendance didn't seem to be overly impressed with the WFL's brand of football, either.

"Where are the professionals??" one fan yelled, "Forget the amateurs. You guys really get paid for that?"

The Storm did manage to finally get their first victory—an 18-7 win. "This doesn't change my mind about anything though," Harris told reporters, "I still want a team here, by 1975 if possible, but more likely by 1976." Harris spoke at the time of building a 44,000-seat stadium in his hometown, insisting that he was not going to move the Storm to London, but that he intended to put an expansion franchise in the city.

But within a month after the London fiasco, Harris had either soured on the league and just plain run out of money.

Beep, beep! . . .

Before Portland's first win of the season in London, Ontario, Rufus Ferguson had been used mostly as a kickoff returner. He didn't get his first carry from scrimmage until the third game of the season. Ferguson continued to be used sparingly as the season unfolded. But the game against Detroit in London on Labor Day was "The Roadrunner's" coming out party. Rufus rushed for 140 yards on only 17 carries as the Storm won its first game of the season. He was named WFL Player of the Week for his efforts. Before the game, Ferguson, when asked about his lack of playing time, told reporters, "The only thing I want is that first win. I don't think about gaining 1,000 yards or things like that. We need that first win in order to get things straightened out." Thanks to the Roadrunner, the Storm got things straightened out. He became one of the Wiffle's top running backs, not bad for someone who had been working as an administrative assistant in the office of Wisconsin governor Pat Lucey. He figured he was through with football until the Wiffle came along. "There are a lot of football players who never get a chance," Rufus said, "I think I play this game pretty well. Portland has given me a shot and I want to make the most of it. I don't get hurt and I try to help out anyway I can." Ferguson so far had accepted any job to help the Storm. He returned kickoffs and was a check-off pass receiver. He did indeed help out anyway he could. And people were starting to notice. "Rufus is a good little runner," said coach Dick Coury, "He gives more than 100 percent. He always wants to carry the ball, and he is a fine leader off the field too." Opponents were also appreciating Ferguson's talents. "Ferguson is tough to tackle," said New York's John Elliott. "You have to get him solid to bring him down." The Miami-born player, who had been cut by Winnipeg of the CFL and ignored by the NFL, knew this was his chance to make it. "This is it," said the Roadrunner, "Coach Coury and Craig Fertig, our offensive coach, have both gone with me all the way." The coaches did indeed go with Rufus all the way, and the Roadrunner finished with 1,086 yards rushing. He led the Storm with 49 receptions and was one of the Wiffle's best kickoff returners with 27 for 612 yards. Rufus continued his fine play in 1975, leading the Thunder in scoring, rushing yards and pass receptions. "Rufus Ferguson was a good football player and a classy person," said Portland's Director of Public Relations, Hugh Wyatt, "He was a player of great dignity and he valued his privacy. I think he changed his phone number four or five times a year. Rufus was a class person and he gave us 100% on the field, he was a nice personable guy; I respected him." As Norm MacLean wrote in the *Pro Football Weekly*, "It's kind of nice to see a little guy play a big man's game with moxie and ability." The Roadrunner, like his namesake, had both qualities to spare.

Despite the money problems brought on by questionable ownership, the team managed to improve during the second half of the season, thanks in part to the club signing several NFL players cut during training camp that September. It helped that both Coury and Mix had strong ties to the NFL, and were good at spotting talent that had been released by other teams.

"The lowest paid players at the time were offensive and defensive linemen and my plan was to go into the NFL, find out which player's contracts would be expiring and then sign them up for the following year at a very significant pay increase," Mix told Aaron Johnson recently at wflnation.com, "And expecting that by the second year we would have had the influx of top NFL players, offensive and defensive linemen, and also try to get players that what we'll call the skilled but overrated positions. I think it was technically a good plan."

Among the new signings were linebackers Paul Guidry and Rick Redman, and defensive linemen Ron Billingsley, Jerry Inman, Steve Thompson and Ben Davidson.

Davidson came over to the Storm after his release from the Raiders. "I injured my Achilles heel in '72 and was on the taxi squad in '73," Davidson told Kevin Smith of WFLVault.com, "When the '73 season ended, John Madden called me into his office. We both knew I was going to be released and he asked me what I was going to do. I told him I was going to play for Portland in the WFL. Ron Mix was the GM and we'd played together in Oakland. John told me the Raiders were set to offer me a job in PR but I wasn't ready to stop playing. Ron was a friend and the opportunity to play another season seemed like a good idea.

"They had great ideas," Davidson added when asked why he joined the new league, "I majored in geography. The idea of a 'World' football league was the attraction. I grew up in East L.A. and spoke Spanish fluently. I had visions of playing a year or two and then getting into management with a team in Mexico City or Madrid. Obviously that didn't happen, but I have few regrets about the decision."

Davidson thought the caliber of play for a first-year league was very good. "There were a lot of NFL players in the league," Davidson said, "One night we played in Jacksonville and Ike Lassiter and Carlton Oats were playing for the Sharks. That was three-fifths of the Raiders old defensive line, myself included."

The offense also benefited from the addition of other NFL players such as offensive guard Levert Carr, running backs Leon Burns and Wayne Patrick, quarterback Pete Beathard, and kicker Booth Lusteg.

Lusteg, at 33, had already seen the best and worst of pro football. He had played for teams as diverse as the Miami Dolphins and the Boston Sweepers.

Lusteg led all scorers in his rookie season with the Bills in 1966. But his path wandered far and wide after that.

He did time with Buffalo, Miami, Pittsburgh, and Green Bay in the NFL, the Boston Sweepers, Long Island Chiefs and Hartford Knights of the ACFL, and the Columbus Barons of the Midwest League.

"The minors are interesting," Lusteg said, "A lot of funny things happen down there. But it's definitely not first class. You know, it's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

Portland won its second game in a row by stopping The Hawaiians, 15-8 before 15,551 fans in Civic Stadium. Rick Redman, an 11-year NFL veteran, sacked quarterback Norris Weese twice. Two other NFL signees, Steve Thompson and Ron Billingsley, added sacks.

"Redman is running the defense," said Dick Coury, although the linebacker did not have his name on the back of his jersey and the P.A. announcer constantly referred to him as "Redmond."

"This was the best our team has played and we beat a darn good football team," added Coury.

Roadrunner Ferguson continued his fine play with 149 yards rushing and both touchdowns. The best part about the win was that it finally moved the Storm out of last place in the Western Division.

The team was in trouble off the field, however. Attendance was not improving along with the team. They were drawing only 14,000 fans per game. Additionally, the terrible lease with Civic Stadium authorities was rapidly draining the team of cash.

"There was a good core of fans but it was a small core of fans," Ron Mix said in a recent interview with wflnation.com, "Our average attendance was probably somewhere in the range of 12–15,000 a game and it probably would have taken 25,000 a game to break even."

The Storm lost 34-15 at home to New York to fall to 2-8-1 and back into the Western Division cellar. Only 13,339 fans bothered to show up for the debut of new quarterback Pete Beathard, recently signed by Mix after being cut by the Chiefs. Mix hoped Beathard could provide some punch to the otherwise punchless Storm, calling him "the turn-around player" he had been seeking. But even a crash course in the Portland offense didn't help the U.S.C. veteran. On his first snap from center, Beathard promptly dropped the ball and the Stars recovered. Ben Davidson walked over to Beathard on the sidelines and told him, "Don't worry about it Pete. If this team is going to elect a most improved player, you're bound to win it."

"Don't ask me why, but men facing disaster always get witty," said Big Ben, "You make jokes or you go crazy."

But with Beathard and a slew of other NFL veterans picked up after being cut from NFL teams, the Storm weren't much of a joke during the season's second half.

As to Beathard's slow start with the team, Coury said, "I take all the blame. He's (Beathard) only been with us one day and there is no way he should be in there that soon. We've given him a crash course, but you can't expect him to forget the Kansas City terminology and pick up ours in that short a time. We rushed him into things and it was too much to expect him to do a job.

"He's a real pro," Coury continued, "He's played 10 or 11 years of championship football. That has to be an asset."

Shufflin' Off . . . To Portland?

After scoring a touchdown, Storm running back Rufus "The Roadrunner" Ferguson liked a do a little dance he called "The Roadrunner Shuffle" in the end zone. He had started the routine in college at the University of Wisconsin. "I can jive with everyone, man," Rufus liked to say, "Know it? Don't you just know it?" TVS guest commentator and old school player Paul Hornung didn't seem impressed when he watched Rufus do his dance after scoring against Shreveport. "That's lovely," Hornung said flatly.

The team continued to turn their season around 180 degrees, winning seven of their final 12 games. Two of those wins were upsets of Birmingham and Memphis.

The turnaround was attributed to the influx of talent from the NFL. The NFL veterans changed the entire dynamic of the team, and the Storm went from a young inexperienced club that was unsure of itself to a strong, tough veteran-laden unit.

Assistant Coach Marty Schottenheimer also had a hand in the Storm's renaissance, developing his coaching style that would help him become one of the game's better coaches. He worked with the team's young linebackers, molding them into a tough cohesive unit. One of the youngsters he worked with was Bob Schmit.

Schmit had played a couple of nondescript seasons at linebacker for the University of Nebraska in the early 1970s. After going undrafted by the NFL in 1974, Schmit signed with the Storm as a free agent. Schottenheimer said that Schmit became his first coaching project.

"Bob went to Nebraska out of Boys Town," Schottenheimer recalled, "He had been a wide receiver at Boys Town. He had very good speed but limited experience at linebacker. I'd work with him, and you could tell he wanted to learn. You could see him getting better by the week. He became a very good player in the league."

Not only that, thanks in part to the diligence of Schottenheimer, Schmit went on the play in the NFL.

With the influx of NFL talent and the development of some of their youngsters, the defense made such a drastic improvement that they earned a nickname: "The Storm Front."

The Storm also starting playing like they had nothing to lose, gambling more than a team ordinarily would.

In Jacksonville, Portland, trailing 17-16, faced a fourth down at the Sharks' 32 yard line late in the game. Beathard dropped back and hooked up with Joe Wylie, who had been with the team just four days after being cut by the Jets. Wylie stepped out of bounds at the 11-yard line with nine seconds left. The much-travelled Lusteg then came on and calmly booted a 25-yard field goal to beat the Sharks, 19-17 with two ticks on the clock.

"Pete threw up five times after we beat Jacksonville," said one of the Storm players, "Hell, he hasn't played a full game in three years."

Portland continued its ramblin', gamblin' ways. Four times against Birmingham a week later the Storm went for it on fourth and long. One of those gambles led to a field goal.

Finally, with 35 seconds left, Beathard hooked up with Bob Christiansen for a 16-yard touchdown pass that gave the Storm a 26-21 upset win over the Americans, their fourth win in five games.

"I saw the ball coming out of the lights, about half of it," said Christiansen, of his winning catch, "but when it hit my left hand I knew I had it."

Christiansen had been battling the flu for three days and went to see a doctor shortly before the game. "I asked him to give me a penicillin shot and I'd make up my own mind just before the game," said Christiansen.

"I'll tell you, I sure wish we'd had this crew to start with," said Coury, "We're so improved, so much more experienced than we were when we began. What can I say about our guys? Pete was great and Bob's catch at the end was super. Our defense was just super. We were really confident at the end. And what a difference, a tremendous difference, with an experienced quarterback like Pete. I don't mind saying I think he's the best quarterback in the WFL. I just can't imagine how Kansas City could part with him."

The fans of Portland seemed to be noticing the new and improved Storm. A team-record 20,469 fans turned out to see Portland, winners of four of their last five, face off against first-place Southern California at Civic Stadium. Portland led, 22-11 at the half, and 22-18 with 1:56 left, but a late touchdown pass lifted the Sun over the Storm, 26-22. A last second rally by Pete Beathard ended with him being sacked from the blind side on fourth down.

"We had a thousand opportunities to put the game out of reach," said a dejected Dick Coury, "But we always broke down somehow—a fumble, an interception. . . ."

Portland traveled to Birmingham, and lost their second in a row, 30-8. "Mira did a great job," said Coury, "especially in the second half when they controlled the ball. I thought we were flat. We are a much better team than we showed."

Asked what the biggest difference was between this game and the win over Birmingham two weeks before, Coury said, "They mixed things up better defensively. They were real aggressive and Jack (Gotta) told me this was probably the best game they had played on defense."

Beathard had two passes intercepted that set up Birmingham touchdowns, and the Storm managed only 84 yards on the ground. "Birmingham played a lot better pass coverage than the last time we played them," said Beathard, "The linebackers did a great job

of clogging up the throwing lanes. The pass coverage made the difference."

The Storm scored on their first possession, driving 69 yards in a march that consumed eight minutes of the clock. Robert "Tank" Holmes circled out of the backfield and caught an 8-yard pass from Beathard to put the Storm up, 8-0. But it was all Birmingham after that. "That first drive was all we had," said Beathard.

Linebacker Bob Schmit was one of the few bright spots, as he had eight tackles and another eight assisted tackles.

Although the team was experiencing a renaissance of sorts on the field, they were having trouble, and plenty of it, off the field. On October 14th, Mix had to call a news conference to announce that the Storm had missed only one paycheck and "there's absolutely no talk of a boycott." Mix held the presser after reports on Sunday the 13th stated that the Storm players hadn't been paid in two weeks and were considering boycotting the game against The Hawaiians on the 16th. The players "were not paid for the last game," said Mix, "It's the only pay period we've missed this year. We don't consider our players to have missed a pay period if they are paid between the end of one game and the start of another." Mix told the press that Harris would pay the players for last week's game when he arrived for The Hawaiians' game.

"We're just in a short term cash crunch," Mix continued, "We have no long-term problems." Mix added that Harris "was just caught short after injecting what he considered adequate financing to carry the club through the season. Bob's selling off some of his holdings in Canada to raise the additional cash and feels very strongly that something good will happen soon."

Mix met with the players on the 14th. "They certainly understand there is no certainty it'll actually be here by Wednesday," he said referring to paychecks, "Mr. Harris is personally very wealthy, but his assets aren't the liquid type."

Mix added that the players "were naturally nervous, but they are willing to wait and see what happens. The morale is good and they consider it a temporary inconvenience."

"I think it was the second game or so (that I was with the team) when one of the players had a check bounce," remembered Ben Davidson, "We had a team meeting and knew we could either walk or play. We took it to a vote, and I voted to play."

"It was a fun league but we knew right away that it was over almost before it started, as we quit getting paid," Coury recalled years later. "We just tried to live day to day and every once in a while we would get a little money to spread amongst our players to keep them going. It was really tough for everybody. The city of Portland was great. A lot of the people chipped in and helped our players financially and with food. The people were great to our players."

"We had no money," Marty Schottenheimer recalled recently. "We didn't get paid. I mean it was a mess."

Despite all the problems surrounding the team, the Storm managed to beat The Hawaiians, 3-0, before another sparse crowd of 11,302 in Civic Stadium. The Hawaiians missed four field goals, one of them blocked by Ben Davidson. The only points came on a 37-yard field goal by Booth Lusteg, who had been on the taxi squad the week before after being replaced by Bob Cooper. But in a weird game of kicker musical chairs, Cooper was waived after just one game.

"I was in Birmingham on the 'taxi squad' because I only kicked," recalled Cooper, "and they wanted a guy who both kicked and punted. The guy they kept was a good punter but not so good kicker, Earl Sark.

"So Portland came and asked to have me come out, and signed me," Cooper continued, "I got out there and found nobody was being paid. I played in one game (ironically in the 30-8 loss to Birmingham) and didn't get paid and had no money, so I had a discussion with Ron Mix on the plane going back to Portland, and I asked to either be paid or released, so they released me. And I went back to Birmingham and finished the season on the taxi squad for $400 a week. So I flew from Birmingham to Portland, then back to Birmingham and then back to Portland in about one week. I was released in Portland, not Birmingham, and I almost wish I HAD been released in Birmingham, because that's where I was living. It was weird, all the cross country flying. I did like Portland, the town. I went back out and lived there for two years when I was done playing ball."

When the Storm released Cooper, who did they reactivate but Lusteg. "I was glad to be back," said the veteran kicker, and so was the Storm.

The Storm's other kicker, punter Ken Clark, kept The Hawaiians backed up all day long with punts of 55, 59 and 62 yards. But the Storm looked flat all day, and wide receiver Jeff Baker blamed the money problems and distractions. "There was a lot of pressure," he said, "A lot of the guys were really down."

After the game, the City of Portland stepped in and took $4,584 off the top of the already skimpy gate receipts to recover the club's back rent on Civic Stadium.

"What the team really needs is for the community to embrace us as its team, not just view us as a group

of individuals trying to extract money from them," said Mix, "Our problem is their problem."

Mix added that what with one of the league's best teams, Memphis, coming to town, he was expecting a sellout of 33,000. "With a sellout crowd," Mix stated, "we could bring the salaries current. Of course, we're hoping to do it before then."

Despite Mix's hopes, the Memphis game didn't draw a crowd anywhere near a sellout. Only 13,288 people sat sprinkled around the seats. But despite their financial difficulties and the apathy of their fans, Portland continued their winning ways by surprising Memphis, 26-25, before a national television audience. The win ended the Southmen's 11-game winning streak.

Pete Beathard had another solid game, completing 16 of 29 passes for 174 yards and two touchdowns to wide receiver Jeff Baker. Most important of all, Memphis, leading the league in quarterback sacks at the start of the game, only sacked Beathard twice. "Our offensive line performed very well," Beathard said.

Linebacker Bob Schmit sacked John Huarte to kill a drive late in the game and also picked off a deflected pass on the next series to set up Portland's winning touchdown drive.

"I guess it was (Dennis) Meyer who got a piece of it and it was right there in front of me. I was shocked at the time," Schmit recalled, "Then suddenly I realized I had the ball and started running." He didn't stop until he returned the ball 18 yards to the Memphis 21. That set up Rufus Ferguson's winning touchdown run of 11 yards. "Everyone executed," said the Roadrunner, "all I did was run." The Storm had been transformed, from a weak sister to a team that could beat any team on any given night, even teams as good as Memphis.

"I think Portland deserves to be in the playoffs," said Memphis coach John McVay, "They beat us and Birmingham. They've shown on the field that they have a right to be in the playoffs."

"A superb win for us," said Coury, "I hope tonight's game puts to rest some of the talk of us leaving Portland. I was disappointed in the crowd, but I really think it's the stadium. But the people we do have following us are very loyal."

Because of the team's tenuous financial situation, the Storm took a commercial flight to Shreveport for their next game, and couldn't afford to take one of their coaches and the team doctor along on the trip. On Halloween Night, October 31st, however, before another national TV audience, the Storm did it again. Dressing up for Halloween like a winning football team, they got two first half touchdown passes from Pete Beathard and made them stand up for a 14-0 win in Shreveport.

"I had great protection tonight," said Beathard, "The out patterns worked well and everything fell into place."

The Storm defensive line of Ben Davidson, Jerry Inman, Chris Stecher and Steve Thompson put tremendous pressure on the quarterback. Rufus Ferguson gained 84 yards and fell 28 yards short of 1,000 yards. He scored both touchdowns and performed his "Roadrunner Shuffle" for the national TV audience. "I like to play and have fun," said Ferguson, "It's just something I picked up."

The win lifted Portland's record to 7-10-1 with two games left. They were now in a fight with five other teams for—if you can believe it—a playoff spot! That's right; a team that had started 0-7-1 now had a chance at the playoffs. Ahh, the wild, wacky world of the Wiffle.

Meanwhile, team owner Robert Harris was denying reports that his Canadian buddies were going to invest $600,000 into the team to pay off the back debts, including player salaries. "It is not true," Harris said from his London, Ontario home, "We do not have the money. We are working with some people, but nothing has been finalized."

In New Orleans (New Orleans? Did this team have branch offices all over North America?), Storm spokesman Hal Cowan said that although the money was not yet in the bank, that it had been promised and should be delivered on Friday the 1st when the team arrived home. Cowan said player salaries were two weeks behind and that the players had been told that they would receive their back pay when they returned to Portland.

Harris met with local Portland investors and said he'd like to have Portland people investing in the club. "I would prefer not to have controlling interest, too," said Harris, a sentiment shared by many in the Portland area.

Harris added that he would make a decision on whether to keep the Storm in Portland after the last home game against Florida.

But during the week it was announced that the team had no "last home game." The team was, according to GM Ron Mix, "forced" to move what was to be their final home game, against the Florida Blazers, to Orlando. This was done with the promise of $50,000 and expenses from the Blazers' new, but as of yet, unidentified owners.

Back-up quarterback Greg Barton, who had been acting as team spokesman, said John Bassett, head of the league's executive committee, told him that the game had to be played in Orlando "because that

$3-million deal of new ownership down there is contingent on moving the game." According to player rep Sam Silas, the agreement also included the understanding that if the Storm made the playoffs, their game would be played in Portland.

The Storm players, however, threatened a boycott and said they would not play in Orlando. "We will not play unless we are paid—before the game," said an unidentified player. "We won't play without the money because we've been bled along for several weeks now, getting only partial pay a couple games and no pay at all the last two games."

"We won't play in Florida," said Greg Barton, "We won't play in Orlando for two reasons. One, moving the game would be completely unfair to our season ticket holders and all our fans. Second, we have a definite chance of getting into the playoffs, and we're not going to blow our chances by giving up home field advantage.

"The players are not greedy in what we're doing," Barton continued, "We want everybody to get back pay—the coaches, the secretaries, the managers, trainers, everybody."

The whole affair became infamous in the annals of the Wiffle. Reportedly, Harris, in an effort to buy himself some time with his disgruntled players, drove around to all the Storm's various ticket outlets and was able to gather $10,000 in cash. He then drove to the practice field with GM Ron Mix (who at this point, judging by the mood of the players, was acting more as a bodyguard than a General Manager). Harris and Mix pulled up to the field and noticed the players all huddled under one of the goalposts. "We can't let the guys get together like that," one of them said, "Who knows what they'll do." Harris then took the $10,000 cash and started handing out $20 bills to the players, delaying a possible mutiny by the players.

"This week has been a nightmare," said Coury, "The last thing on our minds has been football. Every day there is a new catastrophe other than football.

"The mood of the team is not good," the coach continued, "I'm worried. There is no question this thing has hurt us. You can't think of football when you have bills to pay, families to worry about. We're living on promises."

In the end, the team backed down from their threatened boycott and decided to go to Orlando.

To paraphrase the old saying, "They shoulda stood in bed." The team got crushed, 23-0. A Storm assistant coach spoke bitterly about Harris after the game, grumbling, "He took us out of it by bringing the game here."

Mix waited in Orlando for the promised $50,000 plus expenses. It never arrived.

Not only that, the Storm lost Ben Davidson during the game in Florida. "I'd played right defensive end my entire career but Portland was weak on the left side," Davidson explained, "They asked me to fill that role and it was a position I'd never played. An offensive lineman missed his assignment and was looking for someone to block. Maybe he thought he was overmatched . . . I don't know. A more competent football player would've never come in at my knees but he did and that was the end of it. That would've never happened in Oakland because 11 players would've retaliated on the next play."

"It started with that Florida game being switched," said Coury, "It knocked the pins out of everyone in Portland, especially when Harris had a chance to keep the game here—at least that's what he was quoted as saying in the paper."

"I didn't get a dime the next few weeks but ironically I was one of the few to make money," Ben Davidson remembered, "After my injury I received Worker's Comp from the State of Oregon for 6 months. At $176 a week I ended up making a few thousand dollars."

Davidson's teammates were not so lucky. The players went the last few games without being paid, and eventually they had to depend on sympathetic fans for food.

"It's beautiful for the people of Portland to do something like that," said Coury on November 11th, "It's amazing . . . terrific of them to show their concern." Local fans had gotten together and contributed $2,500 for meal money for the Storm players and their families.

"Tonight, there's a steak dinner somewhere for the players and their wives, and they're even giving them a little bit of spending money for the trip to Hawaii," Coury continued. A Storm official said that a local businessman helped launch the fund with $1,000 deposit in a local bank to, in his words, "give the players some financial assistance. Some players are so broke they can't even pay their rent and can't afford to eat."

Except for two token payments, Storm players hadn't been paid for six weeks. Portland's management and staff hadn't received a check since September 15th. The team was also forced to stop issuing refunds for the Florida game.

"I've never been a part of an ownership like this," said an obviously agitated Coury, "I just think it takes local ownership to make the franchise go. You can have outside ownership, but you need someone inside . . . if you're around, you want to be accepted, have what you do approved by those around you.

"An outside owner is not really as concerned with the community," Coury stated, in an obvious reference to Harris, "He doesn't live here and doesn't know the people. It really hurts me to think it has to come down to that (donations) for the players. It really upsets me, embarrasses me and the coaching staff. The owner probably doesn't even appreciate what's happening. It must be an embarrassing thing for an owner to go through . . . to think his team would need help of this nature."

Harris, meanwhile, when interviewed in a newspaper article on Sunday the 10th, said he didn't want to talk about the team's money problems.

When asked by Aaron Johnson of wflnation.com about the team's financial problems, Mix told him, "It started out right away, Bruce Gelker sold the team. And he sold it to a guy from Canada named Bob Harris and Bob reportedly was wealthy but he stopped putting money into the team.

"It was very distressing," Mix continued, "To not be able to pay the guys. It was distressing not being able to help them out. Very distressing. That was the ugly part of being associated with that team is that nobody ever received the full amount of their salary. In fact neither did I.

"I had a personal guarantee from Bruce Gelker on my salary and then I hadn't received anything. I didn't receive anything at all during that entire time I was with the team so I ended up having to sue my friend Bruce Gelker and about three years later, it took that long to get to court, about three years later I got paid. But of course I got paid after attorney fees so financially it didn't turn out so hot either."

The President of Franklin Savings and Loan, Bob Hazen, was said to be leading a campaign to have local investors take over the franchise, and starting a community drive for a new stadium. "I would be anxious to find out what his feeling is," said Coury.

"Believe me, we're alive and kicking," Hazen said. On November 7th, Hazen said that the WFL had given Harris 8 days in which to bring player salaries up to date and pay other current debts or "the league will take over" the franchise. This was confirmed by John Bassett, who said, "If the financial obligations are not met, the franchise would revert to the league. Then Mr. Hazen or anyone else could make a deal with the league people to take over the team." Hazen said he had been in touch with WFL officials on behalf of the Portland Chamber of Commerce in an effort to keep the team in Portland. Hazen said four other people were interested in investing in the Storm to keep them in town.

"Bassett will be coming to Portland in two weeks to talk to our investment people," Hazen said, "As I told him, we want to know what it would cost to keep the franchise going in Portland and what debts we might incur. Maybe our investors might get together and pick those up if they aren't out of line. At the same time, I know (investors) would want a clean bill of health to start again and keep it going a year. But I do know they won't go for the cost of the entire franchise."

Hazen said the town owed a thank you to Gelker and Harris for bringing the team to Portland, but added, "They were both from out of town and didn't have the interest that we in Portland should have."

Bassett said Harris had talked about moving the franchise, but could only do so if certain conditions were met. "The only way it could be moved would be if Mr. Harris made all his obligations to the league and the players, then came to the league and said he wanted to move the team—and then the league approved it.

"We want to stay in Portland," Bassett went on, "If he (Hazen) can put a group together to save it, it would be fantastic."

When asked if he regretted taking the coaching job with the Storm, Coury said, "I hadn't really thought about it. You never know. At the time we came, it looked like a great opportunity. It still looks like a good opportunity in a new league, a chance to start something. Given an equal opportunity, we think we have a good chance to make it in Portland. If Bob Hazen's group decides to keep the team in Portland, I see no problem for us in the following year. Our fans have been great all year, and now it's getting better because they're realizing we have a good football team."

Portland played in Honolulu in their season finale. The team said they would not make the trip until they were guaranteed expenses. Reportedly, however, the team itinerary did not list hotel accommodations. Apparently, the front office figured the players could just sleep on the beach. Despite the hardships, the Storm had somehow apparently made the WFL playoffs. When Shreveport lost earlier in the day to Birmingham, it clinched a spot for the Storm in the 8-team playoff field, with Memphis scheduled to be their first round opponent. "I'm not sure, but that is the feedback I get," said Ron Mix at halftime, "The league probably will make the announcement on Friday."

The Storm wound up losing the finale to The Hawaiians, 23-0. When The Hawaiians scored their final touchdown with just 10 seconds left in the game and then lined up for the action point try, the entire Portland team, frustrated and unpaid for six weeks, silently walked off the field.

Despite the loss, the team finished the season tied with Shreveport for 8th place in the 12-team league and because they had defeated and tied the Steamer in the two meetings between the teams, it seemingly qualified them for the playoffs. However, league officials decided to reduce the playoff field to six teams—without bothering to tell anyone with the Storm. Dick Coury told reporters that the WFL's decision to oust his team from the playoffs was sickening. The WFL changed their playoff format more often than the weather changed in Oregon. Supposedly, the teams with the best second half records were to get playoff berths. Portland was definitely one of those teams. But after their loss to The Hawaiians, the Storm learned they were eliminated from the WFL playoff picture. "For several weeks now, it seems the league has been using us saying we'll get in the playoffs and to keep up the great work even if we aren't getting paid," Coury said.

Soon after, to pile insult onto injury, the IRS slapped a $168,000 lien on the franchise. Harris then gave up the ghost and said he wouldn't dump any more money into the franchise, adding that he had gambled and lost when he invested in the Storm, and that he and the 10 other Canadian investors had decided to withdraw their support of the Portland franchise. The team then reverted back to original owner Bruce Gelker.

"Mr. Gelker inherits everything . . . the team and the debts," Harris said, "We simply lose the money we put into the team. We put in a half a million dollars, rolled the dice and lost. Some people go to Las Vegas to gamble. We went to the World Football League."

When reached for comment, Gelker said he wanted nothing more to do with the team, either. Smart man.

Mix, in Memphis for league meetings, told reporters that the pullout could improve the chances of getting more local financing for the team.

"The franchise becomes cleaner as people fall away," Mix said, "This makes it a more flexible item to deal with."

The Storm had reportedly run up a $2 million tab during their stay in Portland, a figure that included bills, taxes and back salaries.

"We have to live within $2 million the next few years," said Hazen, "and I think we can raise that amount. I have the investors who are interested." But in the end, no one would step forward to save the franchise. By the end of November, the only remnants of the Portland franchise were Mix and two secretaries.

Just like last night's thundershower, the Storm had blown out of town, here and then gone.

CHAPTER 15

Running Out of Steam

The Shreveport Steamer, 1974

"It's great to be back in the briar patch."
—Defensive tackle AL DOTSON, from Grambling, on being back in Shreveport

Steve Arnold's dreams of owning a pro football team had turned into a nightmare. He had visions of bringing pro football to Japan, but he never made it to the Orient. In fact, he never made it outside the country. Eventually, he never even made it to the end of the league's first season.

By all accounts Arnold was in up to his eyeballs, owing money to sporting goods stores, the WFL, and most of the players on his team. Reports surfaced that Arnold was in debt to the tune of $200,000, and rumors indicated that it could be as much as twice that amount. Reportedly, the team's payroll totaled $1.5-million.

Badly in need of financial help, and not getting it from the city and citizens of Houston, Arnold was saved by his old pal Gary Davidson. He arranged for the league to purchase the Texans from Arnold and then began discussions with officials in Shreveport, Louisiana, in an effort to possibly relocate the franchise there.

"What happened was that the Oilers had ruined the town for professional football," opined Davidson, "I doubt if the game will ever truly be successful there. That's why the Houston Texans are now in Shreveport, where interest has been high."

Hopefully Davidson never tried to make a living as a prognosticator. After the Wiffle folded, the Oilers experienced a renaissance under head coach Bum Phillips. The once forlorn team became one of the NFL's strongest franchises, which ignited a fervent following and weekly sellouts of the Astrodome with fans chanting "Luv Ya Blue."

Shreveport Mayor Calhoun Allen estimated the cost of the Shreveport franchise—including its obligations to the league—would be $2.5 million.

Some local merchants pooled their resources and made an offer to the league. Davidson and the WFL agreed but the sale was kept a secret until the ownership arrangements could be finalized. As it turned out, Louisiana banker Bill Bernard would hold the franchise until he could raise the money needed to complete the sale. The franchise would then be moved to Shreveport.

But there was some debate on just *when* the team would move.

Houston Judge Arthur Lesher ordered the Texans to play one more game in the Astrodome when L.A. Frey and Company, a New Orleans meat products business, sought a restraining order contending that moving the team would cancel a ticket promotion it was sponsoring with the Texans franchise. This, company spokesman Fred Siegfriedt stated, would cause "irreparable harm" to their business. The company stated that moving the team before the Memphis game would leave its patrons holding the bag after a free ticket promotion. The company had been redeeming labels from its packages for tickets to the Memphis game on the 25th.

"We are not trying to keep the team from moving to Shreveport," added A.J. Frey, the company's director of marketing, "We are talking only about this one Memphis game. We feel we have an obligation to the people of Houston."

Gary Wright, public relations director for the WFL, said that league attorneys would battle the order and not wait for a hearing.

"Our attorneys of the WFL have assured me that it was an ex parte order, meaning that just one side was heard in Houston," stated Wright, "and they are quite confident that they will get that rescinded and that sure enough Shreveport will have its World Football League team kicking off against the Memphis Southmen next Wednesday."

"I know the enthusiasm for the people in Louisiana for football," said Henry Lee Parker, the Wiffle's director of football operations. "I know it's difficult to say you are going to play a football game next Wednesday when you're not even in the city yet, but we're going to do it in great style."

Mayor Calhoun Allen shared Parker's optimism. "Without a doubt in my mind, we together can make this thing go, the likes of which they haven't seen anywhere throughout this nation," said Hizzonor.

In their first game while in the process of being moved, the team was called "Louisiana," as the Shreveport deal was still hush-hush and no name had been picked for the team as of yet. The media derisively referred to the whole episode as the "Louisiana Purchase." The team, playing with their helmets shorn of logos—for the second time that season, remember the opener against Chicago?—and coached on a very interim basis by Henry Lee Parker, was crushed in Birmingham, 42-14.

"Louisiana" stayed with the Americans during the first half, trailing only 15-14 at intermission. But Birmingham, at 10-and-1 the best team in the league, took control in the second half, scoring three touchdowns and a field goal to win going away.

"These people have had a very long day and their minds have not been on football, but they are professionals and they tried their best," said Parker of his players.

The loss did not dampen the enthusiasm of the Shreveport entourage that had flown to Birmingham to watch the game.

"We're going to be like Birmingham," said Mayor Allen, "We're going to be a great town in the WFL. We already have the money pledged—and then some. And we're already selling tickets.

"We have a welcome petition going for our team with 10,000 signatures already on it," Mayor Allen continued, "The town is on fire. We recognize some of the players have some problems moving, but I think when they get to our town they'll feel a lot better. We're already saying 'our team.'

"I don't know yet when our team will play its first game there but I know this," concluded the Mayor, "some people will be out to see them."

The WFL eventually worked out a settlement with L.A. Frey and Company and the Texans were allowed to go ahead with their move.

In an effort to save money, the team shuffled its coaching staff. Receivers coach Marshall Taylor was elevated to head coach. Defensive line coach Ralph Cavalucci was gone, and three players—linebacker Garland Boyette, defensive tackle Joe Robb, and quarterback Don Trull—were named player-coaches.

The team would play its home games in Louisiana State Fair Stadium, which sat 42,000.

At first, the situation looked brighter with the move to Louisiana. A crowd of 21,357 fans braved a chilly and rainy night to welcome the new team to Shreveport. Although Memphis ruined the party by beating the Steamer, 17-3, it didn't seem to dull the excitement surrounding the new team in its new home.

"I'm very grateful for this enthusiastic reception," said Henry Lee Parker, back to being the league's director of football operations, who appeared with Mayor Allen at a news conference.

"It's a real big thing for us in the area to be selected by the World Football League as the site of the franchise," said Allen, "There is real interest here. The attitude and the spirit are a great part of Louisiana, Southwest Arkansas and East Texas. Without any doubt in my mind at all, we can make this thing go."

"It was a good crowd for the first game," said defensive tackle Rich Glover, "They were really cheering . . . I hope the fans don't get disappointed 'cause we didn't win this first one for them. It wasn't as bad as the first time we played Memphis, when they beat us 45-0."

"It was beautiful out there," added linebacker Garland Boyette.

"The people in the stands were great. It's a whole new environment," offered guard Clyde Williams.

Defensive tackle Al Dotson, from Grambling, said with a drawl in his voice, "It's great to be back in the briar patch."

With Taliaferro retired, Marshall Taylor inserted rookie D.C. Nobles into the starting quarterback position, and introduced the Veer Option offense in an effort to kick start the Texans' stagnant offense. The Veer was a multiple option attack which required a quick thinking and quick moving quarterback. It had been popular with college teams for several years, but had not caught on at the pro level, mainly because it put the team's quarterback in danger of being killed at any time.

A week after the loss to Memphis, an even larger crowd of 22,012 people were on hand to see the Steamer snap a five game losing streak by stopping the bankrupt Detroit Wheels, 14-11.

"I remember when the Detroit Wheels played here in October of '74," *Journal* reporter Jerry Byrd told wflnation.com. "They were really upset and they called a meeting which I went to, I think their owners had just declared bankruptcy and the players had not been paid in several weeks and they were all ready to leave. I mean they were trying to operate a professional team without having any money at all."

Although Nobles hit on 11 of 19 passes and whipped a 63-yard touchdown pass to Rick Eber, Taylor switched to another rookie, David Mays, who sparked the team to the comeback win. Mays hit on a couple clutch third down passes during a 78-yard drive that produced the winning touchdown, and then sneaked one yard for a first down with a minute-and-a-half left to allow the Steamer to run out the clock.

The team awarded the game ball to Taylor, who exclaimed, "That was a great win." Nance rushed for 137 yards on the ground, and said afterward, "I got the ball more tonight. The more you run, the more successful you can be." The defense had another strong game, holding the Wheels to 7 first downs and just 179 yards in total offense. In the third quarter alone, Detroit took possession of the football at the Shreveport 44, 40, 23 and 21—and gained a total of minus 15 yards in those four series. "All of the guys gave a super effort," said defensive lineman Rich Glover, who played several positions during the game, one of which seemed to be running back in the Detroit backfield, "When it counted, we didn't give them anything."

Dance, Dance, Dance . . .

The Steamer was warmly welcomed to Shreveport when they got to town. Lots of folks seemed primed to join the Steamer bandwagon. There were fan clubs, cheerleaders, a picnic, two beer parties, a parade, lots of rabid fans, and . . . Dancing Francis. His name was really George Francis, and he came off the sidelines about 10 times a game to dance with the cheerleaders and, in the parlance of the times, juke and jive (Does anyone juke and jive anymore?) Dancing Francis didn't care what the song was, he'd dance. "I like it," he said, "The crowd really makes it worthwhile. It doesn't matter what kind of music the band plays, as long as I can dance, I can dig it."

Shreveport went out to the West Coast and lost a close one to the Southern California Sun, 25-23. The offense sputtered and Taylor wasn't pleased, saying, "We probably tried to do too much. We're going to have to get the timing down."

The Steamer traveled to Philadelphia to face the Bell. Inclement weather and the overall negative attitude the public held for the faltering Wiffle kept the crowd to an embarrassing 750 fans. That's *not* a typo folks. The author did not mean to type 75,000 or even 7,500, but *750* people. It was an all-time low, in more ways than one. The fact that JFK sat 100,000 made the crowd look that much smaller.

"It was like playing in an empty stadium," Jerry Byrd, who covered the game for the *Shreveport Journal*, said in an interview for wflnation.com.

"Hell, I wrestled in front of more people than that at Indiana (Pennsylvania) High School," said Jim Nance, "and that was indoors!

"But we're an upstart league," Nance went on, "What can you expect on a bad night like this? We're in an NFL city and the Eagles are doing a good job right now.

"We can't compete with the NFL right now," Nance continued, "I think what this league should consider is to get into other cities like Birmingham and Shreveport, build up our franchises, and then get into NFL cities."

The rain made the field a sloppy mess, with ankle-deep muck in some places. "I've seen some bad fields in my day," added Nance, "but I've never seen anything as bad as that one."

"The field was lousy," added Paul Gipson, "but they're playing under the same conditions. It was just a case of toss the ball up and let's see who wins."

"It was pouring down rain," Shreveport defensive back Richmond Flowers told Aaron Johnson at wflnation.com, "I remember that even more than the lack of a crowd. I mean it was intense and nobody had conditioned the field and so we were playing in mud slop in front of those 700 people. I remember there was nobody there and in the locker room at halftime I put a quarter in a pay phone and called Lucia and said, 'I'm playing in a football game against the Philadelphia Bell and there's nobody in the stands and it's pouring down rain.' I mean the coaches couldn't really get too hopped up over that deal when you're sitting there with nobody in the stands."

Shreveport managed to beat Philadelphia in the mud and slop, 30-25, as linebacker Garland Boyette intercepted a pass to clinch the win with 4 minutes left. But the Steamer could also give thanks in large part to the less-than-legal efforts of wide receiver Rick Eber.

Tacky, tacky . . .

Rick Eber was a wide receiver who had bounced around pro football for a few years without much distinction. In three years with the Falcons and the Chargers, Eber had played in only 12 games, catching 11 passes for 184 yards and one touchdown. He had been out of the NFL since 1970 when he signed on with the Texans. But on October 16th, 1974, Eber made his mark on football. Literally. On a rainy muddy night in Philadelphia, Eber's team, the Steamer, was playing the Bell. During the game, center Bob Paschall of the Bell began noticing scratches on the football. As it turned out, it seemed Eber had found a way to tape thumb tacks to his fingers in order to better catch the ball in the muck and mire. "It's like having the ultimate Stickum," said Bell receiver Vince Papale, "It was absolutely pouring rain and he made two or three fingertip catches like nobody's business, and then it turned out that he had the thumb tacks, and he had taped them, put thumb tacks on his fingers." Unfortunately for the Bell, Eber's not very tack-ful act was caught a little too late. Eber had already caught a 39-yard pass for the winning touchdown, and while he earned a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty, Eber's tacky behavior gave Shreveport the win. "They don't even break the skin," Eber told reporters later, "I know they're illegal but they allow the ball to drag, and besides, we needed the win."

A week after beating Philadelphia, the Steamer hosted Birmingham before 24,617 fans. Unlike Houston, the crowds in Shreveport were actually *increasing* from week-to-week, instead of diminishing. "They make enough noise for 100,000," said cornerback Daryl Johnson, "That's what makes it so beautiful."

In a complete turnaround, the Steamer avenged the earlier loss to the Americans by smashing them, 31-0. Could this be the same team that lost 42-14 to Birmingham just a few weeks before? No it wasn't, said Jerry Byrd in the *Shreveport Journal*. "That team was the former Houston Texans," Byrd wrote, "Who didn't like where they had been and didn't know where they were going."

This team seemed to know exactly where they were going, as they racked up 29 first downs and 529 yards in total offense to crush Birmingham handily. The Shreveport defense completely shut down the Birmingham rushing attack, which was one of the best in the league, holding the Americans to a scant 38 yards on the ground. Meanwhile, Jim Nance rushed for 126 yards and Paul Gipson added 107.

Nance scored the Steamers' first touchdown, and then left the game with 9:26 left when a 15-yard run put him over 1,000 yards for the season.

"I would have been over 1,000 a lot sooner if Marshall had been coach all along," said Nance, "With the other man (former head coach Jim Garrett) he tried to tell everybody how to do everything. Marshall has a great attitude. He puts the game plan together and gives the players credit for knowing how to carry it out. It's dynamite."

It was the first time Birmingham had been shut out all season, and the goose egg was preserved when Ronnie Rydalch blocked a field goal try by Earl Sark.

"The difference is support," said David Mays, "When you've got somebody behind you, win or lose, it makes a lot of difference. We're still climbing. Tonight, we proved to ourselves that we can beat anybody in the WFL. Now, we have to prove it to some other people. I'm proud to be here."

"I thoroughly enjoyed Shreveport," said Richmond Flowers in an interview for wflnation.com, "That was a great place to play. They supported the team really well. I mean Houston didn't support us at all. But Shreveport did and when you're playing you like to think somebody cares about what you're doing and it was kind of like a Green Bay situation. So I thoroughly enjoyed the two years I was in Shreveport."

"Corcoran was not the only famous King of the WFL . . ."

It might be hard for people to believe when they hear the name of the most successful man that emerged from the financial wreckage of the World Football League. This man's career almost ended in 1971 when he was arrested and charged with grand larceny. The charges were dropped in 1972 but he had already been fired by WIOD radio and WTVJ-TV in Miami and lost his gig as a Miami Dolphins radio announcer. After that, he eventually found work as a color commentator with the Shreveport Steamer. His short stint with the Steamer, on station KWKH, 1130AM, rehabilitated his image enough so that he was able to return to Miami. It's amazing how new and upstart leagues were able to give opportunities to people who may not otherwise get them. This man continued to dabble in sports and got his

big break in 1978 when he got the overnight national Mutual radio talk show that was originally intended for New York radio personality Long John Nebel. His show would eventually move to Washington and sometimes he would fall asleep during the show and have to be awakened by a producer. The show seemed more fit for a conversation at Duke Zeibert's than a radio show but the man was non confrontational and seemed to be likable. In radio, perceived perception was what programmers wanted. He was easy going and didn't ask any poignant questions. Somehow he caught the eye of Ted Turner and CNN and began a 25-year run on the network in 1985. He became a hot commodity after joining CNN. He was a part of Washington Capitals hockey presentations and did a column for USA Today, which was nothing more than a word here and a sentence there. The columns never were revealing and were never considered Pulitzer worthy but somehow he won a number of major awards including Emmys and a Peabody. He also provided a precursor to what would become partisan cable TV "news" as his show was a landing spot for all politicians who wanted a feel good interview. Luminaries such as Bill Clinton and Tony Bennett paid tribute to him. He became an important figure in American TV and radio, easily making the leap from overnight radio to cable TV. His fawning over political figures, such as his love fests with Ross Perot in 1992, led to many copycats, including Oprah Winfrey, Arsenio Hall, David Letterman and Jay Leno. He recently "retired" but still hosts an Internet blog radio show. If you don't know by now, the man's name, whose career was saved by a short stint as a color commentator with the Shreveport Steamer, was Larry King.

A week later before 20,614 fans in State Fair Stadium, Portland quarterback Pete Beathard surprised the Steamer.

"Pete was always a good short passer," said guard Clyde Williams of his old USC teammate, "but tonight he threw some long ones and scrambled real well. He was a lot better than I anticipated."

The Steamer offense was a lot worse than anticipated, managing just 12 first downs and 238 yards in total offense, one week after tearing the roof off against Birmingham. Nance was held to only 35 yards on the ground. Taylor installed the Veer offense, and gave David Mays his first start of the season, but the Steamer could manage only one first down in the second half. "We couldn't seem to get our offense moving," said Taylor, "We had only 25 plays in the second half."

"We just couldn't get any running game going," Mays said, "We got put in obvious passing situations and they laid back for us. On film they looked like a real aggressive team, but their game plan tonight was to sit back and read."

The Steamer's attitude didn't seem dimmed by the loss, or the fact that they had been promised back pay and then didn't get it. It turned out that the IRS had swooped in and taken all the gate receipts that had been set aside for payroll.

"I guarantee you we'll come back and win the last two," said Clyde Williams.

"We have too many seasoned players to fall apart," added linebacker Garland Boyette, "We'll be right back in there plugging next week."

Sure enough, the Steamer was back in there plugging the next week, erasing a 14-3 Charlotte lead to beat the Hornets, 19-14.

This time the promised back pay was delivered—at least partially, around a third or a fourth of what the players were owed—which helped the team's attitude. Shreveport scored on two fourth-down plays, which frustrated Hornet coach Babe Parilli to no end. "It was terrible," said Parilli.

Another fourth down play frustrated Parilli and the Hornets. On a fourth-and-one with 1:21 left in the first half, Richmond Flowers nailed Don Highsmith for a loss which drew a thunderous ovation from the crowd.

With 12 seconds left in the third quarter, D.C. Nobles, on a fourth and six from the six-yard line hit Doug Winslow for the Steamer's first touchdown to draw the team within 14-11.

"The play was sent in from the bench," said Winslow, "(Johnny) Odom runs a curl and I run an out route. That crossed up the defensive backs and I was wide open."

Midway through the final quarter, Shreveport was marching again but faced a fourth and three at the Charlotte 35. Undaunted, Nobles dropped back, scrambled and then threw to Mike Richardson for an 18-yard gain. With 5:11 left, the Steamer was on the Charlotte one but faced a fourth and goal. Nobles—by now being referred to by the press as "Direct Current" for his electrifying play—gave it to Nance, and the big fullback plowed over for the touchdown, and then added the action point for a 19-14 lead.

Charlotte put together a drive of its own that reached the Shreveport 25, but Willie Parker sacked

quarterback Gary Danielson and forced a fumble, which Mike Walker recovered, to ice the win.

Unlike the week before, the Steamer offense moved the ball well, especially on the ground as Nance—160 yards—and Rocky Thompson—105—battered the Hornet defense.

The Steamer, with a record of 7-11-1, were, believe it or not, still in the playoff hunt, battling Philadelphia (8-11), The Hawaiians (8-11), and Portland (7-11-1) for a spot in the postseason.

But when The Hawaiians shut out Portland, and Philadelphia won by forfeit over Chicago, the Steamer was officially eliminated from the playoffs.

Marshall Taylor knew his team was not ready to play their final game in Birmingham. Some of them had already packed their bags in anticipation of going home.

"We didn't prepare ourselves in practice this week," said an obviously disappointed Taylor, "I feel our football team wanted to go home. It's sad . . ."

But the fact that they showed up at all despite everything that had happened to them was a tribute to the leadership of not only Taylor but Jim Nance and Garland Boyette, as well.

With their minds on their financial difficulties and trying to find off-season jobs, the Steamer turned the ball over five times in the first half alone and Birmingham took advantage to build a 32-0 halftime edge. Birmingham linebacker Warren Capone gained more yards returning an interception and a fumble than Shreveport gained in total offense in the first half.

"Offensively," said Taylor, "we made enough mistakes the first quarter to last a season." Shreveport had a punt blocked, lost three fumbles and had a pass intercepted, as well as watching Willie Frazier and Virgil Robinson drop long passes and Johnny Odom shank a punt off the side of his foot and send it only 28 yards.

"We just made too many mistakes," said defensive lineman Rich Glover, "The offense couldn't get rolling, and every time they got the ball they were in great field position."

Had it not been for the Steamer defense twice stopping the Americans at their own six-yard line, the score would have been worse.

The loss marked the end of the season, one fraught with ownership problems, coaching upheaval, franchise shifts, near empty stadiums, financial hardships and John Matuszak.

Afterward, Taylor had nothing but praise for his players.

"We have a great group of guys," the coach said, "They deserve a lot better than what they got. With all the hardships, all the struggles, the World Football League is here to stay. The players on this team and the other teams are responsible for that, because of their sacrifices.

"It's been hell," Taylor went on, "People don't really know what it's like, unless you're on the inside. There are some men on this team who don't have enough money in their pockets to buy a cup of coffee, who don't know how they're going to get home. But they stuck it out."

"It's been a long season," echoed linebacker and player rep Garland Boyette, "I've aged a lot with this ballclub. They're a great bunch of guys. They hung in there and kept the faith. They could've folded up shop a long time ago. It's a hell of a sacrifice when you work six months and don't get paid. It cost us money to move to Shreveport and continue playing football. We have a choice: we could either destroy the league, or help make the league. The fans in Shreveport are one of the big reasons the guys hung in there.

"We're the biggest losers if the league goes under,' Boyette concluded, "Nobody else is close to us. We've only been paid 30 per cent of our salary for the year. It eventually got to us. You keep telling yourself, 'Go, go, go,' but you're human. It just wore everybody down."

"These guys paid the price," added Jim Nance, "Some of them are going to lose cars, houses . . . but we've done our part, and now it's up to the league and the city. Whoever has this team next year is going to have a championship team. It's a great situation—we have the players and the coaches. We're going to the World Bowl."

Nance said the '74 season had been the most hectic of his nine-year career. "I did everything I could to keep this team together," the big fullback went on, "But we can't live on hopes and dreams forever. We have to get paid. This is our job."

In a clear case of someone not learning from the mistakes of others, Steamer officials admitted after the season that they had inflated attendance figures after the club had moved from Houston in an effort to conduct a stock sale.

Business manager Max Cottrell said that the actual paid attendance for the Steamers' first two games in Shreveport was 23,991, significantly lower than the announced figure of 41,369. Some folks never learn . . .

CHAPTER 16

Sun Rise, Sun Set

The Southern California Sun, 1974

"We'll get players everywhere we can; we'll even look under rocks."

—TOM FEARS, Head Coach, Southern California Sun

Back in the mid-1970's, the NFL held its college draft at the end of January, after the end of the college bowl season. As the 1974 NFL draft drew nearer, headlines had begun to appear about the formation of this new thing called the World Football League.

If the WFL was going to have an impact on the NFL it hadn't become evident yet. The new league, which promised the public a wild and crazy alternative to the staid old NFL and pledged to one day encompass the entire globe, had signed some players and made a little noise, and while the NFL knew it was around, it hadn't taken this new league quite seriously yet. That's because many of the WFL franchises were still roaming the countryside moving from city to city in search of stadium leases, potential investors and community support.

But one of the new league's franchises was able to get a leg up on their league brethren. That franchise was the Southern California Sun, based in Anaheim.

The franchise's primary investor was 38-year-old Larry G. Hatfield, who had started his career as the president of a small computer company. That company later merged with a printing company and became Graphic Services, Inc. In the space of ten years, it had become a conglomerate called Intersystems, Inc., which in 1970 totaled sales of $23 million. After serving as president of Intersystems, Hatfield eventually became president of the Big Brake Auto Repair chain, then sold his interest in that and went into the trucking business. When he joined up with Davidson and his merry band, Hatfield sold his interests in the trucking company, Ladd's Furniture Freight, to devote all his time to the Sun.

"We expect to lose $1-million, but not $2-million over the next two years. We are in this to stay," said Hatfield.

The team, which was originally going to be called the "Dons," settled on the "Sun," a name dreamed up by a panel of club officials and Orange County sportswriters. On January 14th, the freshly-minted franchise announced the hiring of NFL Hall-of-Famer and former Saints coach Tom Fears as their head coach. Fears had actually been hired in November, but the team decided to keep it under wraps while Fears studied film and scouted players.

"He is the first and only man we have contacted concerning his job," said General Manager Fred "Curly" Morrison, a former Ohio State All-American and color commentator for CBS Sports.

People were surprised when the normally clean cut and conservative Fears showed up with a black-and-gray goatee and a new hairpiece that made him look like the baddest 52-year-old man on the planet. Fears instantly proclaimed that in their search for talent the Sun would leave no stone unturned.

"We'll get players everywhere we can," the coach said, "We'll even look under rocks."

To prove his point, the team held an open tryout at Santa Ana Stadium which drew 800 people. One player present at the tryout was actually signed—running back Ralph Nelson, a 20-year-old Compton resident, who had not played football in college.

The WFL held its inaugural college draft eight days later on January 22nd. Their top three choices in the draft were James McAlister, a running back from UCLA; running back Kermit Johnson, also from UCLA; and offensive guard Booker Brown from USC.

Six days later, on the eve of the NFL draft, the Sun and the WFL fired the first shot across the bow of the NFL. On January 28th, the Sun announced that they had signed all three of their top draft picks. All three players were highly sought after by the NFL, and were considered top-notch prospects.

Mike Trope, a 23-year-old former USC student with no legal or business degree, represented the trio. The previous year Trope had landed 1972 Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Rodgers of Nebraska as a client, and then set up a bidding war for Rodgers' services between the San Diego Chargers and the CFL's Montreal Alouettes. Trope was eventually able to deliver Rodgers to Montreal in return for the richest contract in Canadian Football League history. With that, Trope had proven his mettle, showing the sports world that he was an agent who could seal the deal and get the job done.

Trope went to work for Brown and the "Blair Pair," the nickname given Johnson and McAlister because they had both starred at Blair High School in Pasadena. Knowing their worth, he was able to get them all sweetheart deals with the Sun. For his clients, Trope negotiated three-year $350,000 contracts for McAlister and Johnson and a three-year $225,000 deal for Brown.

"Credibility-wise, it was great. They were big stars from the area," recalled Tom Baldwin, a Sun assistant coach. "But the big salaries were also a big reason why the league didn't make it."

"I wanted to play on the West Coast," said Johnson, "I've known too many guys who went to Buffalo or Minnesota, or one of those cold places. They stay there during the season, then head back to California as soon as it's over. I didn't want to do that, so when the Sun approached me, I jumped at it."

"When they first approached me, I thought they were just kidding," said McAlister, "I didn't know anything about the World Football League. But they began to talk more seriously . . . about money, and I got interested."

With the Trope trio under wraps, Fears began working with Morrison and Director of Player Personnel Gerry Okuneff on building a team around them. The franchise was one of the league's most successful in signing draft choices, coming to terms with 25 of their 36 picks. These included UCLA defensive back Jim Bright and guard Ed Kezirian; Arizona State running back Alonzo Emery and linebacker Jim Baker; Oklahoma defensive back Durwood Keeton; Oregon defensive back Jack Conners; Oklahoma State linebacker Cleveland Vann; Tennessee quarterback Gary Valbuena; Stanford center Bill Reid; Kansas defensive back Jim Bowman; Pittsburgh defensive end Jim Buckmon; and San Diego State wide receiver Greg Moses.

The team was also able to sign a passel of talented rookie free agents. That list included Tony Adams, a quarterback from Utah State; linebacker Kevin Fletcher from Ohio State; Kevin Grady, a guard from Oklahoma; wide receiver Ike Harris from Iowa State; safety Eric Johnson from Washington State; Terry Lindsey, a wide receiver from Cal State-Fullerton; linebacker Eric Patton from Notre Dame; Mike Ryan, a center and offensive guard from USC; and Ron Thomas, a wide receiver from San Diego State.

The Sun was also able to obtain defensive end Tim Guy from Philadelphia and defensive tackle Charles DeJurnett from Birmingham.

"We've got a very young team," said Fears, who believed the WFL could reach parity with the NFL in three years, "the youngest in the league. I think at the rate we've been moving this team will be immeasurably stronger than in my first year in New Orleans. These aren't a bunch of donkeys we're bringing in, you know. We're getting some pretty good football players in the next year or two, and our drafting will get better too."

To complement his wealth of rookie talent, Fears added a solid core of veterans in Joe Carollo, John Hoffman, Gene Howard, Jacque MacKinnon, Ed Philpott, Dave Williams, and the one and only Dave Roller, who became one of the team's most popular players and interesting characters.

"Dave was just a good ol' country boy," Eric Patton said. "He was just having the best time he could, breaking curfew, never getting into shape. But he loved playing football."

Roller, who played at the University of Kentucky, spent one year with the New York Giants before being cut in 1972. When the Sun contacted him before the 1974 season, Roller was a labor relations specialist for the Steel Company of Canada.

Roller, at 6-feet 1-inch and 270 pounds, became an immediate crowd favorite and even had his own fan club, "Roller's Rooters," who wore "Rock 'em Roller" T-shirts.

Roller liked to hit and hit hard—and often late—but he enjoyed sacking quarterbacks the most. Actually it was more like humiliating quarterbacks. He even danced over their crumpled bodies' years before Mark Gastineau made it popular and illegal.

"Dave had a few of those extracurricular activities," Fears said.

"That's all Dave wanted to do," Patton continued. "He'd run out of his area, leaving big, gaping holes, just to get at the quarterback."

At times, he would get fined for abandoning his spot. But, since Roller had 17 sacks in his first season, it was difficult to argue with his methods, which definitely had a madness to them.

Slightly less offensive than quarterbacks to Roller were kickers.

"Dave would line up on a kick and yell across the line, 'I'm not only going to block the kick, I'm going to knock you out,'" Tom Baldwin recalled, "Even during practice."

In April 1974, the Sun made national headlines again, signing Oakland Raiders quarterback Daryle Lamonica to a "future contract" set to begin in 1975. Lamonica was part of a stable of NFL stars including Curley Culp, Dick Witcher, and Bob Newton that signed agreements to jump to the Sun after playing out their NFL contracts. The NFL stars were lured by the large contracts offered by WFL owners as well as repelled by the restrictions of the "Rozelle Rule," a measure which effectively curtailed free agency in the NFL and was often challenged in court by NFL players.

The Sun surprised almost everyone in Orange County and elsewhere when they were able to sell 20,000 season tickets. It was believed that with all the attractions in the area—including Disneyland, Lion Country Safari, the Angels, and Knott's Berry Farm—people's entertainment dollar might have been already stretched to the limit.

But the Sun was able to do quite well, and they did it without using an expensive media ad campaign. Instead, Hatfield hired salesmen Roland Speth, Al Lee and Art Clarkson who then put together a 50-person season ticket sales team. The tickets sold like the proverbial hotcakes. "They were easy to sell," said 23-year-old Marianne Cox, who sold 950 season ticket packages at $75 apiece.

"I think we've proven there is no substitute for professional sales people for selling sports tickets," said Speth, "The days of throwing open a ticket window and raking in money are over. The entertainment dollar is stretched too thin. You have to go out in the streets and scuffle for it. Bring me face-to-face with a sports fan and I'll sell him a season ticket—for any sport."

The trio did such a good job in Anaheim that they were "loaned out" to the Houston Texans to help bolster their lagging ticket sales.

The WFL had decided on playing no exhibition games, and that was evidenced in the first few weeks of the season, which included some dull and sloppily played contests. The Sun did scrimmage The Hawaiians on June 22nd at Cal State-Fullerton and won 18-8.

The Sun then debuted with the rest of the World Football League on July 10th, 1974, opening their season in Birmingham, with a crowd in excess of 53,000 on hand. It was a hot muggy night with temperatures in the 80s and the humidity in the 90s. Rumor had it that one of the Southern California assistant coaches went on the hotel bed check the night before the game with an airline stewardess in tow.

The Sun took the field in their road magenta-and-orange uniforms. They were perfect for the funky 70s, the pastel shades fitting in perfectly with things like mood rings, pet rocks, leisure suits and wide bell bottom slacks. But the head coach was not impressed.

"The uniforms were . . . well, colorful," said Fears. "I'm not saying they were good, just colorful."

The Sun led the game, 7-0 entering the last quarter. Kermit Johnson, paying immediate dividends, scored the team's very first touchdown on a one-yard run and finished with 88 yards rushing on 24 carries. But Tony Adams, who otherwise guided the Sun with surprising poise and skill, threw an interception that was returned 50 yards for a touchdown, and Birmingham added a field goal to win, 11-7.

"The quality definitely was not there offensively," said Fears, "We need more polish. The heat was not a factor. We had a good break in the weather. Our defense did an outstanding job and deserved to win."

A week later, on July 17th, the Sun made their home debut against The Hawaiians at Anaheim Stadium. A season-high crowd of 32,008, which supposedly included all 20,000 season ticket holders, watched the Sun race out to a 23-0 lead after three quarters. The magenta-and-orange clad Sun then held off a furious 4th quarter rally by The Hawaiians and prevailed 38-31.

"Man, that was something," said a relieved Fears of the wild and wooly nine touchdown game.

The Sun piled up 19 first downs and 375 yards in offense, putting together scoring drives of 66, 80, 67 and 65 yards. Adams finished 13 of 19 passing for 208 yards and a touchdown. Gary Valbuena spelled him late in the game and went 4 of 4 for 52 yards and one touchdown. Alonzo Emery returned a kickoff 76 yards for another Sun touchdown.

In Week Three, Adams hurled a 40-yard "prayer shot"—you have to remember that this was before the term "Hail Mary" was first coined in the 1975 NFL playoffs—to Dave Williams with no time left

on the clock to give the Sun an incredible 22-19 win over Jacksonville. "There really wasn't anything else we could do," said Fears, "Tony simply had to throw one in the end zone and Williams had to catch it. It worked, and I'll take it."

"I got hit right after I let it go," said Adams, "I saw it about halfway in the air and then all I saw was hands and faces."

The Sun picked on cornerback Jerry Davis, who Adams said hadn't covered Williams much and would therefore be unfamiliar with the veteran's moves.

One of Williams' moves was his tremendous leaping ability, and he used it to leap high in the air and come down with the ball in the corner of the end zone. When he came down, however, he had not only the ball but two bruised ribs as well, and had to be helped off the field.

The winning touchdown capped an 80-yard march that started with 1:45 left. Adams hit on 7 of 9 passes in the drive.

Jacksonville built a 12-0 lead on a record four field goals by Grant Guthrie, with the Sun looking less than bright as punter Steve Schroder fumbled two snaps from center, Terry Lindsey fumbled a punt return and Adams tossed a couple interceptions. Southern California was outgained 162 yards to 24 in the first half.

"They were throwing a defense at us we hadn't seen and they blitzed a lot," said Adams.

But the Sun woke up in the third quarter. Jim Bright intercepted a Kay Stephenson pass and returned it to the Jacksonville 45. Kermit Johnson followed with a 23-yard dash to the 22, and after McAlister gained 2, Adams whipped a 20-yard pass to Williams. Not long after that, a 10-play, 62-yard drive was capped by a 1-yard plunge by rookie Ralph Nelson and the Sun took the lead, 15-12. The Sharks scored just four seconds into the fourth quarter to take a 19-15 lead, setting up Adams' heroics.

On August 1st, in Memphis, the Sun two-game winning streak was snapped as they lost to the Southmen, 25-15. When the offense struggled, Fears yanked Adams out of the game in favor of back-up Gary Valbuena. The Sun netted only 196 yards in total offense, and an Adams interception had been converted into a touchdown by the Southmen. Still, Adams was irked by the move. "I'm upset," Adams said after the game, "I think the coach should have left me in. And I'm going to ask the man (Fears) why he took me out."

"I put Valbuena in to give him experience when it was obvious we had to pass," Fears explained to the reporters, "He's a harder thrower."

Spygate, 1974 style?

Everyone remembers when Spygate made the news in 2007, when the Patriots were accused of videotaping the defensive signals sent from the sidelines by the Jets during a game on September 9th, 2007. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell stated that the act was in violation of league rules, and fined Patriots' coach Bill Belichick $500,000, the maximum amount allowed. But spying and espionage was not new to pro football. Coaches have historically been paranoid on the subject (think George Allen). Who can forget opposing coaches yelling at the light bulb fixtures at the Oakland Coliseum thinking Al Davis had bugged the locker rooms? While George Allen was at the same time paranoid about spying (going so far as to hire people who had the single purpose of shooing people away from practices), he also was accused of employing spies to check in on his teams' opponents. It seems that the WFL was not immune to this type of espionage. During the Memphis-Southern California game on August 1st, Sun coach Tom Fears claimed that players told him early in the game that Memphis' defense was mysteriously able to simultaneously shift with the Sun offense. "We were shifting out of a perfectly balanced formation and their middle linebacker was shifting with our backs with the quarterback's count," Fears said, "This was happening with plays we'd put in that week. There's no way that would've happened unless they'd had someone watching our practices that week." Coincidentally, that was the last week that the Sun held their practice sessions at a 70-yard field adjacent to Anaheim Stadium. After the Memphis game, Fears moved the team's practices to Chapman College in Orange, where the security was tighter. Nothing else was heard or made of the incident.

Back home in Week Five, the Sun welcomed 28,174 fans to The Big "A" but the fans left disappointed, as Southern California lost to the New York Stars, 11-8.

"We were great between the 20s," said a disheartened Fears, "Then we had foul-ups. There was just too many breakdowns. Our pass blocking broke down many times and we just couldn't complete it."

The coach was also upset about the fact that the WFL was not protecting its quarterbacks, and he vented his frustrations after the game. "It's not just our league," Fears snapped, "I felt the same way when

I was coaching in the NFL. In our films, our quarterbacks take some awful shots right after they've thrown the ball. And you can see the ref standing right there and watching it happen. But they won't call it. They choke. We've been lucky so far, but Jacksonville has gone through three quarterbacks and that's a shame. The WFL is a new venture and we're trying to interest fans in our game. But we'll never do it without offense and for that we need our quarterbacks. And it's particularly critical in our first year."

Losing offensive tackle Ed Kezirian, who suffered torn knee ligaments and underwent surgery that would sideline him for the rest of the season, did not help the pass protection, either, or improve Fears' disposition.

The defense played well, holding the Stars to 14 first downs and 240 yards in total offense. "The defense did a fine job outside of the one score," Fears went on, "Dave Roller made some spectacular plays, and our linebackers looked like they all played well." The Sun also forced five turnovers, but could not take advantage of them due to the offensive breakdowns. Part of the problem was that kicker Nick Dzepina missed three field goal tries.

"We're still looking for kickers," said Fears, "We've yet to kick our first field goal."

After Dzepina had failed so miserably, the Sun picked up Flemming Jensen, who had been cut by the Portland Storm. Against Houston in the Astrodome, with the score tied 7-7 with 2:09 left, the rookie from Utah finally converted the team's first field goal of the season, a 19-yarder to put Southern California up 10-7. When the Texans tried to come back, Durwood Keeton intercepted a pass and returned it 66 yards for a touchdown that iced the game with 24 seconds left.

"I told (Jim) Bowman to go deep and I went for the quick out," said Keeton, "They went for the quick one. I knew I was gone when I got it. Heck, there wasn't anybody there but me."

Tom Fears was so disgusted by his team's offensive performance that he benched both his starting running backs, Johnson and McAlister, at one point. He was not thrilled by the fact that his team converted only 1 of 11 third down chances.

"We were terrible offensively in the first half," said Fears, "And we knew we had to go with play action and passing. That's when we started to move."

The Texans hadn't permitted a touchdown at home all year until Jack Conners, who got a key block from James Baker, returned Houston's first punt of the second half a record 91 yards for a touchdown. The return was vindication for Conners, who was burned by Johnny Odom for a 51-yard touchdown in the first quarter. Unfortunately, he left the game later with a dislocated elbow, and was expected to miss 3 or 4 weeks.

With his offense struggling, Fears did not hesitate to identify that his team's strongest position was linebacker, especially rookies James Baker and Cleveland Vann. "Those two are as good as any pair of linebackers I've seen come out of college in years," Fears said of the two rookies, "They're both incredibly quick."

The Sun traveled to Philadelphia to play the Bell on the 21st of August. Disgusted by the conditions of the visitor's locker room at JFK Stadium, Fears had his team dress and undress at their hotel, the Hilton. What hotel guests thought of 37 grimy football players walking through the lobby in full uniform at 11:40pm is anyone's guess.

Kermit Johnson missed the game after suffering a concussion against Houston. "I don't have headaches and I'm not dizzy," said Johnson, "I just don't feel right."

James McAlister then went down in the third quarter with a thigh bruise, and the Sun had to rely on rookie Ralph Nelson. But even without their two leading rushers, the Sun offense moved the ball well, piling up 23 first downs and 430 yards in offense. Adams had a solid game, completing 21 of 40 passes for 318 yards and a touchdown.

Philadelphia jumped out to a 14-0 lead, but two touchdowns by Alonzo Emery and two action points erased that deficit and put the Sun up 16-14. The Bell went ahead again 21-16, but an 11-yard touchdown pass from Adams to Dave Williams put the Sun back on top, 24-21 at halftime.

Philadelphia scored a touchdown in the third quarter to take the lead once again, 28-24. The Sun still trailed with 1:28 left in the game when Southern California got the ball and one last chance.

Adams missed Williams with a pass but the Bell was penalized for an illegal bump-and-run, giving the Sun a first down on the Philadelphia 42. Adams went to Williams again, and missed again, but the Bell was whistled for unsportsmanlike conduct for an illegal head slap. Thanks to the infractions, The Sun continued to move the ball, and Emery finally capped the drive with his third touchdown of the game, a one-yard plunge, to put the Sun ahead, 31-28 with 57 seconds left.

The Bell had one last chance, but another unsportsmanlike conduct penalty with 19 seconds left stalled the drive, and then rookie defensive end Jim Buckmon blocked a last second field goal attempt to preserve the win.

Bell fans were incensed at the officials' calls, and chased the referees back to their car, where they pounded on it and dented the side.

It was a game filled with scuffles and ejections. The game had 16 penalties, 11 on the Bell. Linebacker James Baker had two fumble recoveries and an interception but was also thrown out for fighting.

Back home in "The Big A," the Sun clobbered Portland, 45-15 in a serious mismatch between two Western Division clubs. With McAlister out, Johnson limited by an injury, and some other players out with assorted hurts, Fears had to go with a makeshift lineup again, but somehow he was able to make it work.

Adams picked apart Portland's secondary, completing 12 of 13 passes for 166 yards and three touchdowns in the first half before giving way to backup Gary Valbuena with his team ahead, 37-7.

"There's such a thing as too much protection," Adams said afterward, "I had so much against the Storm, I became indecisive over who to throw to, because everyone was open."

The victory, the team's third win in a row, raised Southern California's record to 5-and-3, a game and a half ahead of the pack in the West.

Portland was so upset by the one-sided loss that they released six players the next day, five of them defensive players.

To bolster his injury-depleted ranks, Fears signed NFL wide receiver Dave Parks two days after the win.

Battered and bruised, the piecemeal Sun hosted Chicago on Labor Day. The injuries the Sun endured pointed out the overall lack of depth in the WFL. The league obviously had some very talented players, but there just weren't enough of them, and when a team suffered a few injuries to some key players, it struggled.

McAlister returned but only saw limited action. The offense suffered due to the manpower shortage, sputtering all day and crossing midfield only once in the second half. The Sun gained just 24 yards in 21 plays and went three-and-out on six consecutive series in the final two quarters. Chicago was able to control the ball for most of the game, running 80 offensive plays to Southern California's 58.

"[*Virgil*] Carter was the difference," said Fears, "He kept getting them out of trouble. Our quarterback played well, but our receivers missed by a couple of inches."

With the Sun kickers just 1-of-9 in field goal tries, Fears released Flemming Jensen and signed another candidate, Ron Svarc, a 27-year-old from Cal-Riverside whose only pro experience was a season with the Chambersburg Cardinals in the Seaboard Football League in 1972. He had recently been cut by the Chargers.

Just four days after their loss to Chicago, the Sun flew to Detroit to face the winless Wheels. "How can you play before that kind of crowd?" asked Adams about the announced gathering of 6,351 fans, which looked closer to around 2,000 people, "We came out to warm up and nobody was there. I believe it affected how we played. We simply kept waiting for the Wheels to beat themselves."

That took longer than anticipated. The Wheels hung tough all evening, despite the fact that they lost 3 fumbles and had only a minus 16 yards passing. They held the Sun to just three points in the first three quarters, a 27-yard field goal by Svarc. Adams had a decent game (11 of 16 for 190 yards) but he had two passes intercepted, the second of which set up a Detroit touchdown to put the Wheels ahead, 7-3 near the end of the third quarter.

Finally, with 10:55 left in the game, Adams mounted the touchdown drive to win it. Taking over on the Sun 33, Adams passed to Ike Harris for 39 yards, and then on a fourth-and-seven play, found Dave Williams at the 24-yard line. Greg Herd had a key run of 11 yards, and several plays later, Adams connected with McAlister for a six-yard touchdown with 4:09 left to finally win the game, 10-7.

Several days after their win over Detroit, the Sun added a couple more warm bodies, signing offensive linemen Marv Roberts and Mike Ryan and running back Keith Denson.

The Sun flew to Chicago for their next game while their owner spent the day in court. Earlier that day, September 11th, Larry Hatfield had been indicted by a federal grand jury on bank fraud charges relating to false documentation on several loan applications, including a $365,000 loan sought for the Sun. It also was noted that Hatfield had reportedly over-estimated his net worth by $250,000 by concealing a $125,000 debt and citing it as an asset instead of a liability.

"The whole thing revolves around a technicality on three loans," Hatfield explained. "I never injured anyone financially. And the loans have since been paid off. Three loans are involved, only one of which involves the Sun. That was a loan for $365,000 for operating expenses for the football club. I was a guarantor on the loan."

Hatfield pled guilty to one count in the trial and received probation and a fine. But he wasn't reprimanded by the league nor did he lose his position as owner of the Sun. Some people raised questions of preferential treatment by Gary Davidson since Hatfield was one of his compadres. In any event, Hatfield was able to keep

his position with the Sun and, not only that, was an investor in the Wiffle in 1975.

That night in Soldier Field, the Sun trailed 28-15 with 4:41 left. Then Gary Valbuena, filling in for Tony Adams who had hurt his ankle earlier, looped a 32-yard screen pass to Kermit Johnson for a touchdown that narrowed the gap to 28-23. Southern California got the ball back with 3:02 left but Adams' desperation pass to Dave Williams was broken up by Chicago's Harry Howard to kill that drive.

The Fire could not kill the clock, however, and the Sun got the ball back for one last chance with 1:04 left. On third down and one with 20 seconds left, Adams whipped a bomb down the right sideline toward Keith Denson, who had been signed just a few days before. Denson grabbed it at the one and stepped into the end zone for the winner.

"I've never had a team that has been able to come back so often," said Fears, "They have a lot of character."

The Sun kicking problems were continuing, however. Punter Norm Hainlen punted 4 times for an anemic 32.6 average against the Fire. He was tenth in the league in punting average. Four days after the loss to Chicago, Fears put Hainlen on waivers and brought in Mike Burke, a rookie who had been cut by the Dolphins in '73 and the Rams in '74. Fears also waived offensive linemen Bill Reid and Mike Evans and wide receiver Greg Moses, and added offensive lineman / tight end Chuck Bradley and tight end Dick Witcher, who had signed a "future contract" with the team but had been waived out of the NFL.

"I don't know if I can take too many more of these," said Special Teams Coach Tom Baldwin after the Sun rallied for another late win, 29-24 over Detroit on September 18th.

Backup quarterback Gary Valbuena connected with the newcomer Witcher—on his very first play with the team—for a 26-yard touchdown pass in the final minute after the Sun had finally blown a 19-point lead with 1:47 left.

"I only had four days to work with Witcher in practice," said Valbuena, "but I knew he had good hands and could make the catch."

"I wasn't the primary receiver, but the linebacker that apparently was taking me got caught up in traffic leaving me open," said Witcher, who had been cut by the Bears.

Jim Bright's interception with 18 seconds left sealed the deal.

"I am glad to get it over," said Tom Fears.

Burke wasn't really an improvement over Hainlen in the punting department, lofting five punts for an average of only 36.6 yards. Fears shrugged his shoulders, released Burke and brought back Hainlen. He also brought in yet another placekicking aspirant, Rod Garcia, a rookie from USC who had been cut by Oakland. Garcia was the seventh kicker the team had tried so far.

On September 25th, the Sun hosted the demoralized Jacksonville Sharks. Southern California had edged Jacksonville, 22-19 on the last play of the game back on July 24th at the Gator Bowl. But the Sharks' franchise had since fallen on hard times and had missed several paydays. They had to be plied with the promise of back paychecks to even fly to Anaheim for the game. The dispirited Sharks put up little or no fight—"We stood around and did nothing" said Sharks' coach Charlie Tate—and were crushed, 57-7. Southern California scored 31 points in the second quarter alone and led 46-0 at the half to capture their fourth game in a row and seventh in their last eight contests.

The Sun gained 549 yards in total offense and recorded 23 first downs.

"I like winning them this way," said Fears, referring to the fact that the Sun had been involved in eight games that had been decided by seven points or less.

"This was the kind of win we needed after all the close ones," echoed Adams, "I think a big thing is that we finally caught up with our rest after travelling so much. We figured it would be a tough game so we started throwing right away to open them up."
Even Garcia got into the act, nailing a 44-yard field goal (only the team's third successful attempt in 13 tries) and also kicked off deep.

The Sun was knocking on the door of a 64-0 lead, perched on the Jacksonville 5-yard line late in the game. But they fumbled, and the Sharks turned around and marched 95 yards to their only touchdown.

A week later, on October 2nd, the Sun trailed 15-0 in Portland in the early going and 22-11 at the half. But the team got two beautifully thrown touchdown passes from Tony Adams, the second one to 35-yarder to Keith Denson with 1:56 left, to give the Sun a 26-22 come-from-behind victory.

The Storm, bolstered by the addition of at least a dozen NFL veterans signed off the waiver wire, gave Adams a lot more trouble than the team had six weeks before, when the rookie hit on 12-of-13 passes. This time, the Portland defense sacked Adams 4 times, pressured him often, and covered his receivers like a blanket.

Portland had one last chance after the Sun scored their go-ahead touchdown. But quarterback Pete Beathard missed two passes, had another dropped and then was sacked by Charles DeJurnett on fourth down to finish it.

"They are a much better football team," said Tom Fears about the Storm. "I knew that but our players didn't."

A week later, the Sun won their sixth game in a row and ninth in ten games and clinched at least a tie for the Western Division title by edging Shreveport, 25-23. The win gave Southern California a record of 11-and-4 before 24, 223 fans at the Big A and a national TV audience.

"I am glad we won ," commented Fears, "We are off all over. The passing wasn't our best and the receiving wasn't our best. We had a chance for about seven interceptions and only came up with one. There is consolation in clinching a tie for the division championship, but we don't want to go for ties."

Despite the absence of leading tackler Dave Roller, who had been ejected, the Sun defense took charge late in the game to give the Sun their second win of the season over Shreveport.

The Power of Positive Thinking

Doug Patty was a 34-year-old limited partner with the Sun. He said he had invested about 900 large in the franchise. Did losing that kind of coin discourage Mr. Patty? Not in the least. Mr. Patty told the press that he wanted a WFL club of his very own, possibly in San Jose, Little Rock or Oklahoma City, in 1975. "I had no idea how exciting this was going to be when I got involved," said Mr. Patty, "I believe in this league and I want to be more than a limited partner in it. It's going to make it." Now that's taking the power of positive thinking just a smidge too far.

A week later, the team didn't enjoy the usual champagne celebration, but the victory was just as sweet as Southern California whipped Birmingham, 29-25 to clinch the Western Division crown and a spot in the WFL playoffs.

The win, the teams' seventh straight and 10th in the last 11 games, gave the Sun a record of 12-and-4, tied with Birmingham for the third-best mark in the league.

Southern California, in a thoroughly impressive performance, had a surprising and convincing advantage of 426 to 213 yards over the Americans, while running 10 more plays than their counterparts.

Adams completed 20 of 30 passes for 316 yards and a couple touchdowns as the Sun rallied from an early 17-3 deficit. The rookie quarterback went over 3,000 yards passing for the season in the process.

"Adams played a good game," said Fears of his quarterback, "He scrambled around and picked things up. We wanted to establish our running game and set up play action. We knew we had to score because Birmingham has a potent offense.

"We started out kind of rotten, but they came through for us," Fears added, "We're a young team and they have to buckle down. They're not serious all the time yet they come around when they have to."

As good as the offense was, however, the biggest play of the game was by the defense.

The Sun led 18-17 in the third quarter, but Birmingham had the ball on the Southern California 30. On a third-and-six, the Americans went for a sweep around right end.

But linebacker Eric Patton, who had been released by the Packers in 1972, sniffed the play out and dropped Jimmy Edwards for no gain. On fourth down, the Americans missed a field goal. The Sun took over and drove 70 yards, with McAlister scoring from the three to put Southern California up 26-17 and the game out of reach.

Patton played all six exhibition games in 1972 with the Packers but was cut a week before the '72 opener. "I was just hoping to make the taxi squad," said Patton, "Ray Nitschke, Fred Carr, and Dave Robinson were there and no pro team carries three middle linebackers."

Patton began teaching English at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana. "One of the teachers walked into the faculty lounge one day and asked if I had heard about the WFL," Patton related, "and I hadn't. When I heard there would be a team in Anaheim, I was 10 feet off the ground. I was so excited that night I took my wife out to dinner."

Patton found himself competing with veteran Ken Lee for the middle linebacker spot, and wound up running second string. Then he broke a toe and was out a month.

But when he got back, Patton outplayed Lee and passed him on the depth chart at midseason. Now, with the WFL struggling to keep it together, Patton, for whom the Wiffle had meant a second chance, was hoping the league could make it.

"We're all desperately hoping things can be worked out," Patton said, "Mistakes have been made in management, but that's history."

Patton had gotten tired of the jokes that the press and others had made at the expense of the WFL. He fumed when he heard that after Charlotte had their uniforms impounded by sheriff's deputies someone cracked, "Next thing you know, that league will be playing skins-and-shirts."

"A lot of people laugh at the problems we're having and all of us in the league can't understand why," Patton said sharply, "Like that Charlotte uniform incident. What's funny about that? It gave me a sick feeling in my stomach when I read it."

After all the previous kicking candidates the team had tried had given Fears a sick feeling in his stomach, it looked like the Sun had finally found one who could kick off and make field goals. Rod Garcia was proving to be that kicker the team had been looking for all season, as he kicked two field goals.

"We can claim it now," Fears said in reference to the division crown, "It's good to win it this way instead of backing in. And we're going to play the rest of them to win, too."

The team seemed to be in the fabled cat bird seat: division champs, winners of seven straight games, owners of one of the best records in the WFL, and looking forward to a first-round bye in the playoffs.

Then the Wiffle pulled the rug out from under them. On Tuesday the 22nd of October, the league's Board of Governors suddenly and surprisingly added two teams to the playoffs, making the field 8 teams instead of 6, and took away the Sun's first round bye. Not so surprisingly, the decision drew the wrath of the team's brass.

"We don't like the new playoff set up at all" said Hatfield, "I don't know why all the other owners are for it. I spoke my piece against it before going along."

"The new playoff plan is terrible," added Curly Morrison, "I feel they are making it a joke by putting eight teams in.

"If the owners think they are going to make profits this way they are whistling Dixie," Morrison went on, "I think if they took a poll of general managers and head coaches all but one or two would agree it is wrong. It's ludicrous. It's Mickey Mouse. All these things they are doing are making us look like a bunch of jerks. There should have been four teams like it was originally. I feel we could have filled the stadium with a semi-final here, but not with a first round game."

"We feel our winning the division championship doesn't mean much," said Adams, "All of us were down after hearing that."

As Adams had predicted, the announcement of the playoff change, plus the clinching of the division, led to a natural letdown by the Sun. Hosting the 6-and-10 Philadelphia Bell, Southern California was humiliated 45-7 before a hometown crowd of 26,412 in "The Big A."

"I hope that was our bad one," said Fears after watching the Bell scored 14 points in the third quarter and 31 more in the last period, "I was afraid of complacency. We're a young team and don't know how to accept success.

"It is important for us to win the next three games, to keep momentum for the playoffs," Fears continued, "Maybe the Bell taught us a lesson—play them one a time. Philadelphia wanted this one more a lot more than we did."

"Our team will now have to regroup and get it going again," commented Hatfield after the loss.

"We had all kinds of opportunities and should have led the Bell 21-0 at halftime, but our offense broke down. We were flat," added Morrison.

"Right now we're not looking to the playoffs but to Charlotte next week," Fears stated.

To Charlotte the Sun went a week later to face the Hornets, who were the transplanted New York Stars. Unlike New York, North Carolina had greeted the franchise warmly and enthusiastically. There were 19,436 fans on hand and Fears swore they sounded like a lot more.

"I couldn't even hear my quarterback when he talked to me on the sidelines," Fears said afterward, "In these circumstances our kids did a helluva job tonight."

Tony Adams ran the quarterback sneak for two touchdowns and passed to Dave Williams for a third to pace Southern California to their 13th win of the season. His 35-yard pass to Kermit Johnson set up another score.

After the game, Adams said he had some bad news for Daryle Lamonica, set to join the Sun in 1975. He said that despite Lamonica's $1.5-million contract, he won't be the Sun Number One quarterback if Adams had anything to say about it.

"I've always invited competition," said Adams, "It brings out the best in me. I play best under pressure.

"I've done my job this season," Adams continued, "With his age and the lack of playing time the last couple of years, Lamonica is going to be under more pressure than I am. I talked with the club's owner and he's told me the Sun will play the guy who's doing the best job because he wants a winner. That's good enough for me."

Adams was a 14th-round pick by the Chargers in 1973, but spent the season on the San Diego taxi squad.

"Heck yes I'm glad the new league was created," Adams went on, "I don't think I would have ever gotten the opportunity to play in the other league. I felt in my own mind I was better than some of the quarterbacks who were playing over there, too."

Despite the win over Charlotte, there was still uncertainty in the Sun camp. McAlister went down with an ankle injury during the game, and he—as well as everyone else associated with the team—seemed concerned about the injury. "I heard it pop twice when I turned it," said McAlister after the game, "It's numb now. I'll get it x-rayed when we get back but Jack (team trainer Jack Rockwell) doesn't think it's broken." The x-rays were negative, but McAlister did not make the trip to Honolulu.

Then, on Tuesday the 5th, Fears predicted after that day's workout that in Hawaii "We might get the heck kicked out of us because of the carnival atmosphere around here."

Sure enough, the Sun struggles continued in Honolulu, and their playoff chances began to look tenuous. They suffered their second shellacking in what they had hoped were three "warm-ups" for the playoffs, losing badly to The Hawaiians, 29-8, who would probably provide Southern California's first round opposition on November 21st.

"Other teams have come over here and done a good job. Why couldn't we?" Fears asked after his Sun had only 12 first downs and 195 total net yards. The Hawaiians defensive line chased Adams and his backup, Gary Valbuena, all night, sacking them a total of six times. Adams was harassed into a 5 of 16 passing night before Valbuena spelled him.

Already playing without McAlister, the Sun then had to watch Dave Williams limp off the field with an ankle injury.

Trailing 15-0 in the third quarter, Southern California reached the Hawaiians' 10, but an Adams pass was picked off, and The Hawaiians then drove 90 yards for another touchdown.

"All we can do is play them a lot better," said a dejected Fears afterward, "We can't change anything now."

Especially their economic standing. It turned out that another reason for their poor play down the stretch could have been financial, or more precisely, the lack of finances. Like so many other WFL teams, the Sun became haunted by the spectre of financial problems.

"The first time I started feeling there could be money problems was in October," linebacker Eric Patton said. "We had the best pregame meals I ever had. They were lavish feeds. All of a sudden, they were giving us hamburgers and pancakes before games. They tried to tell us it was more nutritional. It didn't take long for the players to put two and two together."

When he was hired and the season began on such a positive note, Fears thought the new league had a chance. But that feeling soon began to fade.

"Once I got into it, I could see the league wasn't that well financed," Fears said. "The first owner was a nice guy, but I don't think he had two dimes to rub together."

"We're eking along, payday to payday," admitted Larry Hatfield, who had to reveal that his team was in serious financial difficulties, "We're taking in investors all along—$100,000 here, $100,000 there. But we haven't been able to get that one big chunk to carry us through the first year.

"We'll lose a million dollars in cash this year, and I'm not even talking about book losses."

The trouble first was made known on November 1st, which was supposed to be a payday for the Sun. But the players were told that there would be no checks.

"I met with the players and told them we had a temporary cash flow problem," said Hatfield, "and that their checks would be waiting for them when they got back from Hawaii. They were super about it—no threats or anything like that."

The players seemed to take the news in stride.

"We've come too far to go sour on the front office now," said defensive tackle Dave Roller, "I'm sure all the guys would finish the season whether we got paid or not."

The season finale was at The Big A against the Eastern Division champions, the Florida Blazers. Both clubs had 13-and-6 records, and 28,213 fans came out on a foggy and chilly night to watch the battle between two of the league's best teams. The crowd gave Southern California an average of 26,359 fans a game, one of the top attendance figures in the league. But as it turned out a lack of significant day-of-the-game ticket sales seemed to have been the biggest factor in the financial bind the club found itself in. Day-of-the-game sales had averaged only around 1,500 a game.

"Figure it out," said business manager Bob Negrey, "If we got 5,000 walk-ups per game at an average of $5 per ticket for 10 home games, that's a quarter of a million dollars."

The Blazers, another destitute club, had missed half their paychecks but it hadn't curtailed their resolve. They came out fighting and took a 24-7 lead into the locker room at halftime.

"The players knew they stunk up the joint in the first half," said Fears, "We were playing with people we haven't seen in 10 weeks, like Clay Jeffries."

The injury bug continued to bite the Sun. After Kermit Johnson went over 1,000 yards for the season, he left the game with a pinched nerve in his shoulder. McAlister was back but his bum ankle limited him to 5 carries. One of those, however, was a 6-yard touchdown run that cut the Sun deficit to 24-14.

The Sun took advantage of some key Blazer turnovers as the team, in Fears' words, "got down to business in the second half." Charles DeJurnett recovered a fumbled pitch out at his own 45 in the fourth quarter. Adams maneuvered his club down the field, but the drive stalled at the Florida 8. Garcia, continuing his solid field goal kicking, then nailed a 25-yarder with 12:29 to play to draw the Sun within seven.

Later in the fourth quarter, Eric Patton recovered a Florida fumble at the Blazer 41. Adams went right to work, and with the clock moving against him, marched his club downfield. On a third down, Adams hit Dave Parks for a 15-yard completion to the 11. Two plays failed to gain anything. On third and ten, Adams was sacked for a 15-yard loss. Undaunted, the rookie quarterback promptly stepped back on fourth down and hit Keith Denson in stride for a touchdown. The game was now tied at 24-all.

The Blazers drove to the Sun 39-yard line on their ensuing possession but the drive stalled right there. Florida decided to punt and Billy Hobbs lofted a beauty that was downed at the Southern California 1-yard line.

The Sun seemed content to run out the clock and send the game into overtime. But Florida coach Jack Pardee used his timeouts to perfection, and the Sun was finally forced to punt from its own 10-yard line with 12 seconds left.

At the snap, Florida linebacker Eddie Sheats rushed in and partially blocked Hainlen's punt. The ball fluttered to the ground at the 8 yard line. Pardee rushed his field goal team onto the field, and the Blazers kicked the three-pointer with time running out to win the game.

After the game, Fears was upset because he felt the Blazers were offsides on both the blocked punt and field goal. "We should have gotten a fine punt off. There's no reason why we shouldn't have," said Fears, "After the runback they wouldn't have had time to run a play."

Eric Patton was upset about his team's lackadaisical play, telling reporters, "We got tough too late. I don't know what's wrong with us. You think you have it figured out and then you don't."

There was certainly something wrong with the Sun, who had lost three of their last four games after clinching the division on October 16th. For most of the season, they had appeared to be one of the WFL's stronger teams, both on the field and at the bank. But like so many of their league brethren, the Sun started to feel the money pinch. On November 15th, a day after the loss to Florida, management failed to make the final player payroll of the regular season. By this time, the front office had worked nearly a month without pay, and Hatfield was scrambling to find some financing. Rumors had it that he was negotiating with new investors including friends of TVS announcer Merle Harmon.

Obviously, the lack of pay had put the team in a bad mood heading into their opening round playoff game against The Hawaiians. That could have been a good thing or a bad thing.

CHAPTER 17

Confused Playoffs and Questionable Payoffs

The 1974 WIFFLE Playoffs

"It was suggested that the playoff teams had been chosen by placing collect calls to all the clubs and admitting those that accepted them."

—JOE MARSHALL, Sports Illustrated

The Wiffle had finally dragged itself limping to the end of the regular season. With the season finally—and mercifully, in some cases—over, it was now playoff time.

Now, usually in sports, the playoffs are a time of celebration, as the cream of the crop have risen to the top and are prepared to do battle for the league championship.

Football playoffs are especially dramatic. Unlike other sports, football is a situation of "one and done." There are no "best of five" or "best of seven" playoff series. In football, one loss in the playoffs and they can stick a fork in your butt, you are done! Your season is over. This has always brought a sense of urgency and added excitement to football playoffs.

This should have been a time for the WFL to finally, really shine. They had several solid teams, all of which had a chance to win the World Bowl. Memphis was 17-and-3 and looked to be the class of the league. Birmingham was 15-and-5 and undefeated at home. Florida finished 14-and-6 and had the league's best defense. Southern California ended the season 13-and-7 and had a lot of offensive weapons. These teams would have matched up well against any of the others, and all of them, with the exception of Florida, had drawn fans extremely well.

But the Wiffle, which had done so much wrong for so long, couldn't even get their playoffs right.

Memphis had been so impressive that many around the league joked that the league championship should just be handed to the Southmen. But at least one person took that suggestion seriously. On November 15th, Southern California GM Curly Morrison announced that the league championship should be awarded to Memphis because of their superior record, and that any playoff games would just lose money anyway.

"It's ridiculous to continue when we know the playoffs are going to lose money," Morrison announced.

Calmer heads prevailed, however, and it was announced that playoff games would indeed be held. But how many teams and games would the playoffs include?

The league couldn't seem to decide. At first the playoff field included four teams, the three division champions and a wild card. Then it was increased to five, with the addition of the team with the best second-half-of-the-season record. Then it was increased again, this time to six, with the three division champions and the next three clubs with the best records.

"Some of the clubs, like Portland and The Hawaiians, bear no resemblance to the clubs they had in the first half of the season," said Wiffle vice president Max Muhleman, "Those two are among the best clubs in the league now and just six weeks ago they were about the two worst."

Then someone got the bright idea of having eight teams in the playoffs, and that was the format for awhile. But including eight teams in the playoffs in a league that had only nine active franchises seemed a little too democratic, as well as just a little silly.

Curly Morrison phrased it a little differently. "It's Mickey Mouse," he said.

"We feel our winning the division championship doesn't mean much," said Southern California Quarterback Tony Adams, "All of us were down after hearing that."

Jerry Byrd, who covered the Shreveport Steamer for the *Shreveport Journal*, remembered an article he wrote about including eight teams in the playoffs. "The lead of my story was everybody made the playoffs except Shreveport," Byrd told Aaron Johnson of wflnation.com, "Well, the point of the story was not that Shreveport had the worst team in the league but that there were too many teams in the playoffs. You know? When all but one team makes the playoffs! I had never heard of that happening in any other league that I covered."

When the league decided to include eight teams, the original schedule called for two "upper bracket" games—Florida at Charlotte and Portland at Memphis—and two "lower bracket" ones—Philadelphia at Birmingham and The Hawaiians at Southern California. On November 16th, Memphis owner and WFL Executive Committee Chairman John Bassett phoned Charlotte owner Upton Bell. Bassett told Bell that the Florida / Charlotte game would have to be scrubbed because less than 1,000 tickets had been sold and the players would be lucky to get $100 for the game.

"We had a team party at Len St. Jean's house after the season ended," recalled Charlotte coach Babe Parilli, "and the players approached me and said that they would play in the playoffs for free—they wanted to go down and take on the Florida Blazers. I told Upton this and he said, 'Let's get 'em together,' but it was just too late. Money wise we couldn't give the players anything. The guys were great. They wanted to go down and play the Blazers without receiving a penny."

Bassett then announced that Florida would play Birmingham and the winner would then play Memphis in the World Bowl game on November 29th in Memphis.

This format, of course, was totally unacceptable to Curly Morrison, among others. "If you're going to have three teams, at least have the three division winners," Morrison complained, while making a very good point, "Florida, Memphis, and us (Southern California). I mean, why have divisions in the first place?"

One day later, the league officially announced that Bassett basically didn't know what he was talking about. The playoff schedule would include two first round games, Philadelphia at Florida and The Hawaiians at Southern California. The winners would play Memphis and Birmingham, respectively, in the second round. All of this maneuvering necessitated moving the World Bowl game back a week, to December 5th. The game would be played at a site to be determined.

"Every day a new opponent," said Blazers' director of player personnel DeWayne Jeter, "I can't figure it out. Maybe it will be changed again. All I know is we watched film one whole day on Charlotte. We watched film another day on Birmingham. Now we're preparing for Philadelphia. It's a mess."

"They originally told us we would play Philadelphia," said Florida defensive tackle Paul Vellano, "Then on Saturday they told us we were playing Charlotte, so we prepared for Charlotte. Sunday they told us we were playing Birmingham. Monday they tell us we were playing Philadelphia after all. Everybody was going crazy, saying, 'Well, what are they going to tell us tomorrow, that we're playing Jacksonville,' which had already disbanded!"

"If you're going to have six teams, then you should at least have the best six," said Florida running back A.D. Whitfield, "And your byes should go to your division winners."

An editorial in the *Pro Football Weekly* called the WFL playoffs "the survival of the sickest."

Only in the WFL could a third place team—Philadelphia—qualify for the playoffs over a second place team—Charlotte. Maybe Joe Marshall of *Sports Illustrated* put it best. "It was suggested that the playoff teams had been chosen by placing collect calls to all the clubs," Marshall wrote, "and admitting those that accepted them."

The Southern California Sun finished the 1974 season at 13-and-7 and won the Western Division but management failed to make the final player payroll of the regular season on November 15th. By this point, the front office had worked nearly a month without pay. President Larry Hatfield was scrambling to find some financing. The debts were mounting although the team was near the top of the league in attendance.

The unpaid Sun players held a vote on whether to play the scheduled playoff quarterfinal on Thursday, November 21st against The Hawaiians. Advance ticket sales had been disappointing, and the team announced that only 10,000 tickets had been sold prior to the game. Like the Florida Blazers, who hadn't received paychecks in 12 weeks, the Sun players took a vote and decided to go ahead and participate in the playoffs. As it turned out, not all of the Sun players were on board with this decision.

After consulting with their agent, Mike Trope, Sun offensive tackle Booker Brown and 1,000-yard rusher Kermit Johnson decided to boycott the playoff game. Trope's other client, James McAlister, was already going to miss the game due to an injury.

The pair had been kept out of practice on Tuesday the 19th by Trope, but he promised they would play the game.

But on Thursday both Johnson and Brown failed to show. GM Curly Morrison tried to call the players and their agent to no avail. He then temporarily suspended them. The other Sun players were shocked and confused. They were already playing with five starters banged up due to injuries, and this news had to take the wind out of their sails somewhat.

"I thought that it was a bit sleazy," remembered defensive tackle Dave Roller. "Their agent told them to 'walk.' A lot of other players on the Sun weren't making a lot of money. What about them?"

The Hawaiians also had to deal with some negativity on the eve of the playoff game. In Oakland, regents for the University of California–Riverside filed a $10,107 suit in superior court, charging the team with nonpayment of bills.

The regents said the club sent a $9,603 check in October to cover the $100-a-day rental fees for the use of the facilities at the Cal-Riverside campus for preseason training. The check, however, like so many involving the WFL, had bounced higher than a Super Ball and demands for payment had been unsuccessful.

Diane Plotts, the club's acting GM, told the press that the problem was minor, and was a combination of a cash-flow misfortune and a creditor's panic. "They hit us in a cash crunch—a short time span when there wasn't any money in the bank," Plotts said, "We asked them to wait a couple weeks, but evidently they didn't want to. People are scared to death of the WFL."

Plotts said the school would be sent a certified check either on Friday the 22nd "or Monday at the latest." She said that The Hawaiians had not been notified in advance of the suit, and that the team claimed they owed only $9,063 and not the $10,107 that the suit was calling for.

Due to all the confusion over the Wiffle playoffs, the first-round game between the Sun and The Hawaiians game drew only 11,430 people to Anaheim Stadium, the team's smallest home crowd of the season. The Sun had averaged 26,000 a game during the regular season. Sun officials complained that the WFL hadn't given the team enough advance notice to promote the game. This is what happens when you change your playoff format on a daily basis.

Before the game, quarterback Tony Adams was named the Sun's MVP. "I was named the team's most valuable player and presented with a $1,000 check," Adams said. "I felt a little guilty about getting a check. When I walked back to the sidelines, the guys looked like they were dividing it up in their minds. In fact, Dave Roller met me before I got to the sidelines and said, 'Don't plan on spending all of that; $1,000 split 36 ways isn't very much.'"

The Hawaiians got the first break of the game when linebacker Jim Sniadecki intercepted an Adams pass and returned it 20 yards to the Sun 23. Quarterback Randy Johnson then hit tight end John Kelsey for 20 yards to the 3-yard line. From there, Albert Davis carried it into the end zone to give The Hawaiians a 7-0 edge.

The Hawaiians added a 23–yard field goal by R.A. Coppedge, and then Willie Williams returned a punt 27 yards to the Southern California nine yard line. A penalty moved the ball to the 4, and from there Johnson and Kelsey hooked up again for a touchdown and a surprising 17-0 bulge.

The stunned and demoralized Sun fought back gamely, scoring on a 37-yard field goal by Rod Garcia and a 46-yard touchdown pass from Adams to Keith Denson that capped a 71-yard drive and cut the deficit to 17-11 at the half.

A 42-yard field goal by Garcia early in the third quarter cut The Hawaiians lead to 17-14. But the Sun had used up all its ammunition. They were out of bullets.

A 2-yard run by Davis put The Hawaiians up 25-14 early in the last quarter. Then Adams went down with a sprained ankle. Gary Valbuena came in as relief, but threw three interceptions, two of them picked off by linebacker Adrian Young. The second pick set up The Hawaiians' final touchdown, an 8-yard pass from Johnson to John Isenbarger. That score, with 4:55 left in the game, touched off a donnybrook in the end zone. Defensive back Jim Bowman and Isenbarger started fighting and both teams joined the fray, with players slugging it out for more than a minute. Bowman was ejected.

The Sun outgained The Hawaiians, 402 total yards to 254, but the team sorely missed the big play capabilities of Kermit Johnson and had their quarterbacks sacked 6 times.

"They were too much for us," said Fears, "We were too crippled to hold off their pass rush."

"We were undermanned and then two guys don't show up," said Larry Hatfield, "I thought we had everything cleared up."

"There was no warning," said GM Curly Morrison. "We had a good relationship all year. I was kidding with them and talking about the game in the training room Wednesday.

"When they didn't show up for taping I started trying to call them and their agent. We didn't know if they were in an auto accident or what. I hope to meet with them as soon as possible."

Morrison, head coach Tom Fears, assistant coach Ernie Wheelwright, and several players claimed they were completely surprised that Johnson and Brown did not show up after voting to play.

Fears believed that the missing players shocked the team, and hurt morale. The team was not helped by the fact that Adams, starting guard Kevin Grady and punter Norm Hainlen were all knocked out of the game with injuries and Bowman was ejected for fighting.

"We had to play piecemeal without any depth," said Fears, "We played well under the conditions, but everything would have had to go right for us to get over the top.

"I'm very disappointed Kermit and Booker didn't show up. They didn't call us or tell us anything. That didn't help us any. I have no idea why they didn't come. The playoff confusion affected us greatly. The breaks might have evened up at the end, but when they take away the impetus from you early, it hurts. They got to us early."

Player rep Dave Williams couldn't explain why Johnson and Brown did not appear because "they told me they'd be here and I expected them to play. I think their agent is to blame."

As for their agent, Trope said his clients were now free agents and free to negotiate with the National Football League.

"There are provisions in their contract which stipulate all three become free agents if the club fails to pay them 48 hours after a payday," said Trope. The team had missed the payday on the 15th.

"The players became concerned about the possibility of their being injured in the playoffs," added Trope, "We've heard the Sun is close to having its medical insurance policy cancelled."

Trope also said that the trio would renegotiate with the team provided they had assurances that the franchise "has been satisfactorily refinanced."

While many of the Sun players were surprised that the players didn't show, defensive tackle Dave "Rockin" Roller was not. He vented to the press afterward, and laid the blame for the players' boycott and the loss on the doorstep of the front office.

"If management had done their part, we would have gone all the way," he said, "You can't win if you can't concentrate. And you can't concentrate if you don't get paid."

"It sure as hell didn't help any not having Kermit and Booker," said Fears, "I'm terribly disappointed. They didn't call us. It's a bad way to do business."

McAlister and Johnson, who had signed their famous deal that was supposed to pay them a combined $750,000 over three years, wound up collecting only about half of what they were owed.

In later years, the "Blair Pair" said that their signing with the Sun was a decision that played a big part in derailing their NFL careers, and that they recalled that their season in the WFL was held against them when they reached the NFL in 1975, Johnson with the San Francisco 49ers and McAlister with the Philadelphia Eagles and, later, the New England Patriots.

"Nobody advised me on it," McAlister said of his signing with the Sun, "and I did something that possibly cost me a long-term career."

The Florida Blazers were also upset.

They didn't like the fact that they—Eastern Division champions—had to play a first round game while Birmingham—a runner-up in the Central Division to Memphis—got a bye. It seemed to the Florida players that the WFL was setting it up so that Memphis and Birmingham—considered the league's two best teams and two best draws—would meet in the World Bowl. The Blazers were using that old bugaboo—a lack of respect—to motivate themselves.

"Some of those teams didn't even deserve to make the playoffs," said Florida linebacker Larry Grantham, "We feel the league hasn't given us the consideration we deserved as Eastern Division champions."

"This new system goes against the principles of what sports are all about," said Blazer running back A.D. Whitfield, "It's illogical. This whole season is illogical."

"Birmingham and Memphis both drew a bye," said defensive tackle Paul Vellano, "Why should a divisional championship team like us have to play and a wildcard like Birmingham draws a bye?"

"Two weeks ago," said quarterback Bob Davis, "there was no doubt in my mind we could win the World Bowl if we played to our capabilities." Davis added that he almost quit when he learned of the new playoff format, and that two NFL teams had approached him with offers to jump back to the established league. But Davis said he'd stick with the WFL unless he got an "outstanding offer from the NFL."

"Although the playoff money is small," Davis concluded, "and we are forced to play a team like Philadelphia, you only get one chance to win the first World Bowl title, even if it is tainted."

The WFL and the players' union jointly announced on the 20th that the participating athletes would divide 70 percent of the gate receipts from each of the first two playoff games equally.

Then, as the Blazers prepared to face Philadelphia, it looked like a ray of hope might finally be breaking through the clouds on the franchise's horizon.

For months, Managing General Partner Rommie Loudd had been talking about finding new investors. He promised the players and the fans that new money would save the day and save the team. The day before the game, rumors flew that the new money had finally arrived. Team attorney Bob Deutsch announced that he would introduce the new, but yet un-named, owner and a check for a partial payment on the Blazers prior to the playoff game with the Bell. Deutsch declined to name the new owner or reveal the sale price. The players were naturally skeptical of the whole thing, and rightfully so. One of them posted a cartoon on the dressing room bulletin board that read: "I feel like a mushroom. I'm kept in the dark and fed bullshit." Then, hours before the Blazers were going to face the Bell, it looked like Loudd had finally made good on his so-far empty promises.

An impromptu press conference announced by Deutsch introduced the man who was supposed to be the franchise's savior. That man was Robert Dwight Prentice, a Cocoa Beach banking investor who said he was helping out the Blazers financially because "my kids like football."

Prentice, of Cocoa Beach Mortgage Co., said he was representing a group of investors ready to pump $4 million into the team. He announced that his fellow investors included Robert J. Hook, a business partner, close friends John and Gertrude McElligott of Cocoa, and Manning and Nancy Taylor of Cocoa Beach and their two sons, Lee and Coleman.

As a show of his good faith, Prentice presented a check for $1,500,000 to Deutsch on TV to pay off the team's debts and also 13 weeks of back pay. The check was drawn on a corporation called "TW Limited" of Nashville, and written on an account said to be on deposit at Nashville's First American Bank.

Prentice spoke with the team briefly in the locker room before the playoff game, and met with Bob Davis and Eddie Sheats. Then, just prior to the kickoff, Prentice met with reporters with his wife Virginia at his side.

"I think this is going to be a lot of fun," said Mrs. Prentice, who obviously hadn't talked to any of the destitute players or their families to get their input on just how "fun" the season had been so far.

Earlier in the week, rumors had spread that Arab oil interests were going to invest in the team and the WFL to help promote a huge real estate deal. It seemed that anytime a multimillion-dollar sale or big money deal was rumored to be happening in the mid 70s, Arab money just had to be involved. When asked if Arab oil money was being used to bail out the Blazers, Prentice flatly denied these reports.

"I wouldn't know anything about that," he said, "The same one who wrote that must write fairy tales." Prentice laughed heartily and added, "I wouldn't know an Arab if I stumbled over one."

Still, when queried, Prentice was not certain where the New York banks he would be dealing with were obtaining their funds.

John Bassett, chairman of the WFL's executive committee, also denied rumors that Arab oil money was behind the new funding of the Blazers. "It's good solid money from American banks," said Bassett, "There are no camels parked at the front door."

"I've never been an athlete or even much of a sports fan," said Prentice, who was to become chairman of the board and treasurer of the Blazers if the WFL owners approved the sale, "My kids are great fans. Personally I'm not."

Prentice proved that much by having difficulty following the ball as he stood on the sidelines for the game. Hook said he even kidded Prentice because at the beginning of the game Prentice was rooting for the wrong team.

Apparently Loudd, Managing General Partner before the sale, would continue as the team's chief administrator with a new title as Club President.

Bob Deutsch, who had been newly appointed as the club secretary, said Prentice would be the club's treasurer "because of his background in finance and matters that will help the business organization." Deutsch added that the sale would give the Blazers "more money than any team in the WFL."

Two WFL owners in attendance at the game said the sale would not become official until it was approved at a league meeting taking place the upcoming weekend in Memphis. Deutsch, however, countered that the sale had already been approved.

"I've got it in writing," Deutsch said.

The prospective new owners said they planned to create a "trust fund" to guarantee the players' salaries for next year. That was all well and good, but the Blazer players were still wondering about their salaries for *this* year. And as far as a "trust fund," the players were not impressed, since they had very little "trust" and absolutely no "funds."

That evening the Blazers hosted the Bell in the opening round of the playoffs. Ticket manager John Smylik said he expected less than 12,000 fans for the game. Deutsch said the Blazers' fans had been abused by the WFL and could not be expected to turn out in any great numbers for the contest. Unfortunately, both men were right. Only 9,712 people, Florida's smallest crowd of the season, were on hand for the nationally televised game. The crowd was small despite the fact that anyone holding tickets from the Charlotte and Birmingham games that had been moved from Orlando in October could now exchange them for playoff tickets at no charge. But despite a lack of interest on the part of their fans, and buoyed by the promise of new money and new hope, the Blazers, as Pardee said, "came to play."

And play they did, especially on defense as they continually and effectively stifled one of the WFL's most high-powered offenses.

On Philadelphia's first series of the game, Claude Watts of the Bell took the handoff and was blasted by Paul Vellano. The ball came loose, and Rickie Harris scooped it up. As the bewildered Bell watched, Harris raced 30 yards to the end zone.

"It was a late whistle," Bell coach Ron Waller protested after the game, "The TD shouldn't have counted. I think the call was ridiculous."

"I thought at first it was a dead ball," Harris admitted, "and I was waiting for a whistle all the way."

"It was a questionable fumble," recalled John Land. "We felt he had hit the ground and the ball came out. We argued but the officials gave it to the Blazers. It was a low scoring game, and we were driving. I felt that if we had scored things would have been different."

"I couldn't see the ball myself," said Pardee, "There was no whistle. The officials didn't think the ball was dead. That was a big play, yes, but there was still 58 minutes to go."

Most of those 58 minutes belonged to the Blazers' defense. They held the Bell's potent and multi-faceted offense to 253 total yards, and forced four turnovers. Jim "King" Corcoran hit on just 11 of 32 passes for 137 yards and two interceptions. Their only score in the first half was a 37-yard field goal in the second quarter by Gerry Warren, who missed a 27-yard attempt in the first quarter.

"Jimmy didn't have a good game," remembered John Land, "I've played with Jim long enough to know that when he gets excited he sometimes would overthrow his receivers or short-arm it, throw the ball into the dirt. We couldn't establish the running game. Eddie Sheats and Louis Ross raised havoc on us all night. Florida controlled the line of scrimmage."

The Blazers struggled on offense as well, especially in the first half. Reamon was held to 30 yards in 17 carries and had an 18-yard touchdown run called back by a penalty. Strock missed three field goal tries. Harris' touchdown return had Florida up 8-3 at the half.

Early in the third quarter, the Blazer offense showed signs of life. Davis hooked up with Latta, who made a beautiful catch between several Bell defenders and raced down the sideline to complete a 45-yard scoring play. The action point pass try failed, but the Blazers now led, 15-3.

Then the Blazer defense again provided an instrumental piece to the outcome. The Bell marched from its own 33 to the Blazer 14. From there, King Corcoran zipped a bullet to Len Izzo, who dropped the ball. But the referee dropped his flag, signaling pass interference on Florida. That gave Philadelphia a first-and-goal at the two.

Although the crowd was small, it was vocal, and their chorus of boos forced the Bell to rehuddle three times. When the Bell finally got the play off, Mike McBath dropped John Land for a two-yard loss. On second down, Corcoran threw incomplete. On top of that, the Bell was called for holding, and the 10-yard penalty moved the ball back to the 14. Corcoran dropped back to throw again but was sacked by Eddie Sheats and John Ricca for an 11-yard loss.

That brought on the field goal team, and Warren made the 42-yard attempt. But Bell running back Alan Thompson had run onto the field during the snap, and the illegal procedure penalty nullified the kick. On the next try by Warren, the Bell was flagged another five yards for illegal motion. With the ball now on the Blazer 35, the Bell finally just sent in the punting team.

For all intents and purposes that was the game. Strock climaxed a short 29-yard drive with a 24-yard field goal and the Blazers had won 18-3.

"Two more to go," Pardee said afterwards, "Philly is tough to defense consistently with all their formations but we came up with a touchdown, four turnovers and a goal line stand."

Everyone agreed that the goal line stand was the turning point of the game. "That was a big series," said Pardee.

"It was a superb goal line stand," proclaimed Ricca, who contributed five tackles and two sacks to the Blazers' cause.

"That was the biggest point in the game to me," Ricca added. "It was first-and-goal on what we thought was a bad call and they ended up in punt formation.

The defense had a big night. It was a big win for a group of guys who have been through what we've been through the last week."

"That first play, Harris' recovery, was the biggest play in my mind," said Larry Ely, "The defense scored and that set the pace. The goal line stand was a big boost."

"We were a little off offensively tonight," said Latta, "but everything will be all right against Memphis. We want Memphis."

"They can't beat us three times," said Del Williams, when asked about the Southmen, "We were sluggish on offense. We had trouble getting started but the defense came through. We'll get our turn next week."

The Blazers didn't know which was more exciting, advancing to the league semifinals or the prospect of finally getting paid.

Tackle Mitch Johnson said, "With all the adversity we've had, I don't see how anybody can stop us now—especially if what we heard about this money is true. It's a whole new outlook, a whole new desire to play."

But over the weekend, the dark clouds began to gather again on the Blazers' horizon. First, Prentice's name was added to the lawsuit filed by attorneys for David Williams, Jr., the original owner (remember him?), who wanted to block the sale.

Then, four days after proudly flashing the $1.5-million check, Prentice suddenly hesitated at closing the deal because of questions raised by the WFL Board of Governors. The WFL brass had grown suspicious of Prentice and his group, and began asking questions. Prentice didn't have any answers, or worse, the wrong answers. So, on Monday, Prentice balked at closing the deal. He ordered his attorneys "to hold up closing procedures on the contract to purchase" the Blazers. The WFL Board of Governors were said to be deciding whether the sale violated a league by-law against mortgaging a franchise. As it turned out, Prentice had put up Blazer stock as collateral on loans for the purchase.

"I've asked for a meeting of the board of governors within a week to make it clear whether or not there are any problems with the by-laws, and if so, to amend the by-laws," said Bob Deutsch, who added that Prentice had indeed ordered his attorneys to hold up closing on the purchase of the franchise until the situation was clarified.

Prentice had said he would go ahead and pay the players anyway, but so far had failed to live up to that promise. The team was used to this. First it was Rommie Loudd, now it was Robert Prentice. Both full of empty promises. Deutsch spent Thursday at a Nashville bank, still hoping the deal would go through.

"I went to Nashville and I was supposed to get the okay to get the money," the attorney said, "I was prepared to write out the players' checks but the OK that was promised did not develop. So, there is still no money."

While the Blazers' front office was trying to straighten out its affairs, four teams prepared for the next playoff round. In one game, Birmingham hosted the surprising Hawaiians. Like the other playoff contests so far, the game was not well attended. Only 15,379 people were on hand at Legion Field, a far cry from the 53,231 who attended the team's opener in July. The Wiffle had to be concerned. When your playoff games draw what turn out to be season-low crowds, you know you are in trouble.

The Americans dominated the game on the field but not on the scoreboard. They led only 7-3 at the half and fell behind 11-7 early in the third quarter.

But Matthew Reed came off the bench in the second half to spell George Mira and engineered two touchdown drives to win the game. His teammates awarded him the game ball.

Birmingham shredded The Hawaiian defense for a team-record 308 yards rushing, 147 of them by NFL veteran Joe Profit. Center John Matlock said it best, stating, "Our backs ran the heck out of the ball."

"It wasn't the most I ever gained," said Profit, "I got 209 with the Falcons once. Most of what I got tonight was off-tackle.

"It's the first time I've ever been in a playoff game and had a chance to win it all since I've been in pro football," said Profit, who had labored for some lousy teams in both Atlanta and New Orleans.

Wide Receiver Alfred Jenkins was named the team's Most Valuable Player at halftime, and showed why he walked away with that bit of hardware. He caught a 32-yard touchdown pass from Reed and also returned a punt 27 yards to set up another TD.

"Alfred told us at the half that he could beat his man on a deep post," said Gotta, "and his punt return put us in a position to score a touchdown. He is simply a gamebreaker."

That punt return set the Americans up at The Hawaiians' 26-yard line in the first quarter. Profit then ran for four, Jimmy Edwards raced around end for 20 yards, and then Charley Harraway plowed in from the two.

Birmingham moved the ball but couldn't work the scoreboard. Earl Sark missed a 32-yard field goal, and the Americans, despite dominating the action on the field, still led only 7-0.

In the second quarter, The Hawaiians, despite being almost embarrassingly outplayed, trimmed the lead

when Randy Johnson hooked up with John Isenbarger for a 66-yard gain. That set up a 30-yard field goal by R. A. Coppedge with 4:40 left in the half that narrowed the gap to 7-3.

The Hawaiians took the second-half kickoff and promptly drove 57 yards in seven plays. A pass interference call against the Americans moved the ball to the seven, and a few plays later, Johnson dove over from the one. Back-up quarterback Norris Weese added the action point, and Birmingham, despite a big advantage in total offense, suddenly found themselves trailing, 11-7.

The Americans retaliated with a march to The Hawaiians' 14, but a holding penalty and a 20-yard sack of George Mira stalled that drive. The chants of "We want Reed" started up in the stands. When Birmingham got the ball back, Matthew Reed came off the bench in place of Mira. "I don't want to let them down," said Reed, and he didn't. His third play was the 32-yard touchdown to Jenkins that put the Americans back in the lead. Reed then threw to tight end Ted Powell for the action point, and Birmingham was back on top, 15-11.

The Americans took over again after The Hawaiians failed to move the chains—er, Dickerrod—and went on a time-consuming 94 yard drive in 19 plays. Reed, who once again directed the march, raced around the end from the three for the touchdown. Although the action point failed, Birmingham led, 22-11 with around seven and a half minutes left.

The Hawaiians gamely fought back, quickly driving 43 yards in six plays. Johnson passed 17 yards to Vin Clements for the touchdown, and then Weese converted the action point with a pass to John Kelsey. With 4:37 still left, The Hawaiians had cut the deficit to 22-19 and were still very much alive.

But Charley Harraway killed what chance The Hawaiians may have had. When Birmingham took over, the NFL veteran had runs of 6, 2, 6, 9 and 12 yards despite a stacked defense. "We moved it when we had to," said Dennis Homan, "That last drive was fantastic. We kept it four minutes." Reed finally fell on the ball on the last play of the game, and the Americans had prevailed, 22-19 to advance to the World Bowl.

"This is the first year of the World Bowl and we can be the first team to win it," said Reed, "I'd like to be part of the first team to win the World Bowl."

When asked if Reed stepping in for Mira had created a quarterback controversy, Homan said, "Nobody is down on George. He's a super quarterback."

"It was a physical game, a tough game, the toughest we've played," said John Matlock, "and we're not going to stop here."

"This really feels great," said Coach Jack Gotta, "This is the greatest. I can't say enough about how much everybody put into it. This is the best Thanksgiving I've ever had.

"We're the first team in the World Bowl. Memphis and Florida have still got to go through what we went through tonight."

What Florida was going through still boggles the mind to this day.

The next evening, in Memphis, on the eve of the kickoff for the Florida / Memphis playoff game, Bob Deutsch, at the game with Rommie Loudd and club comptroller Rocco Iatesa, was still waiting on the promised money from Robert Prentice and his bunch. And so were the none-too-happy players.

"We don't care about the money anymore," said Matt Maslowski, "We're proud of ourselves and our coaches because that's the only people we have to be proud of. We apparently don't have an organization to be proud of."

Bob Davis, who had emerged as the team spokesman, said angrily, "The WFL has tried to ruin the Blazers since their inception. We're mad now. The majority feels we're never going to get paid. But we're going to finish out the season because of the pride factor."

"We took it personally," said Chuck Beatty in a recent interview, "that motivated us. Memphis was a team with no financial problems, and here we were a rag-tag group just out to get a little paycheck."

"We're going to take it out on Memphis," said Jack Pardee. But the odds, as usual, were against the Blazers. Memphis had not lost a game at home all year. They had beaten the Blazers twice. In Pardee's words, Memphis had "every advantage in the world over us."

"It's tough to run a football organization when you're getting ready to prepare for Memphis and you're more worried about getting your paycheck than J.J. Jennings," the coach added.

Then, as the game progressed, the odds against the Blazers got longer. In the first quarter, the Southmen looked unstoppable. They owned the first 10 minutes of play, and looked absolutely devastating.

Memphis marched 55 yards in 10 plays on its opening possession, helped by a pass interference call on Miller Farr in the end zone. That gave the Southmen a first and goal on the one, and J.J. Jennings, who ripped the Blazers' defense for

in the first half, scored from there. Jennings added the action point, and Memphis went up 8-0.

Florida had to punt after their ensuing possession, and then was penalized 15 yards for interfering with the punt returner. Memphis proceeded to march 74 yards in four quick plays. From the 45, John Huarte hooked up with Ed Marshall for a touchdown. The action point failed, but the Southmen had a 15-0 lead with 5:55 still left in the first quarter.

The game was beginning to resemble the contest on August 28th when the Southmen had rolled up 251 yards rushing as they had easily whipped the Blazers. Memphis was virtually pounding the Blazers again, and it looked like Florida was already out of it. As it turned out, one player already was—literally. "I got a concussion," recalled Larry Ely, "and I was still out on the field and I could barely stand up. I called the defensive play in the huddle, and as we lined up I was facing the sideline, just standing there, completely out of it! Billy Hobbs starts yelling at me, 'Larry, turn around, turn around!' Memphis ran a play right at me, and Billy had to come over and make a great tackle on the running back."

Memphis continued to dominate the action. Huarte hit 9 of 13 passes, and Memphis outgained the Blazers 232 total yards to 91. The Blazers cause was not helped when defensive tackle Paul Vellano broke his arm and missed the rest of the game. In the second quarter, the Southmen marched 78 yards, and only an end zone interception by Farr stopped that advance. The Blazer offense, like a week before against the Bell, was sluggish. Reamon had a lackluster first half, and Davis had completed only 3 of 10 passes. "We played unemotional football in the first half," said Pardee.

Then, on the last series of the half, Davis was hit and suffered bruised ribs. The Blazers were facing a situation they hadn't all season—playing with the game on the line without their starting quarterback and emotional leader.

Into the breech stepped Buddy Palazzo, a long-haired rookie from Southern Mississippi. Palazzo had spent seven weeks of the season on the Blazers' taxi squad, and had attempted only five passes all year. He hadn't played in 1973, and had intended to try out with the New Orleans Saints in 1974 until the WFL opportunity presented itself.

"I worked in Gulfport last year and saved some money, that's how I've gotten by this year," Palazzo noted.

"When he went in there, we told him not to panic," Pardee said of Palazzo, "We simplified everything. We just blocked and ran."

"I wasn't nervous going in, just anxious," said Palazzo.

Still, the odds were against the Blazers. Down 15-0, outplayed and outclassed in the first half, and having to rely on an untested rookie quarterback, Florida's backs were definitely against the wall. But this team was used to that. Seemingly doomed to defeat, Pardee's crew just wouldn't accept their fate. This never-say-die team didn't.

Art Imitates Life

As the second half opened, a cold, driving rain started to fall. A dozen years later, Hollywood would make a football movie called "The Best of Times," in which a team led by Kurt Russell and Robin Williams rallied from behind in the second half in a rainstorm to upset a perennial powerhouse. That was a case of art imitating life, because it was reminiscent of the Blazers' improbable second half performance on November 29th, 1974.

Palazzo proved his chops early in the third quarter, dropping back and whipping a 22-yard pass to Maslowski. That set up a 25-yard field goal by Strock to make it 15-3.

"I tell you, it was like having a team of horses out there," Palazzo would say later, "It was just a matter of pulling the right reins. These guys were fired up."

Memphis drove to the Blazer 36, but there the Florida defense rose up and stuffed the Southmen twice with just a yard to go for a first down. Palazzo then marched his horses 64 yards, 25 of them on a pass to Latta. With 4:02 left in the third quarter, Reamon raced 21 yards to the end zone. The action point made it 15-11.

Memphis started yet another drive, rolling to the Florida 15-yard line. But Ricca burst through and sacked John Huarte for a 13-yard loss to the 28. The Southmen now had to settle for a field goal, but Bob Etter missed the 44-yard try. It was still 15-11, and the game was beginning to turn.

"That was a big play for us," said Pardee of Ricca's sack, "That turned it around for us."

The Blazers were now taking control of the game. Outplayed in the first half, the Florida defense had stiffened, and held the league's leading offense to just 96 yards in the second half. On offense, they started running more sweeps, and the Southmen had trouble stopping them. The Blazer ground game had Memphis' defense back on their heels. "Tommy Reamon ran

wild that night," recalled Larry Ely, "He just wouldn't go down, he was possessed. Memphis seemed to be chasing him all night, and in the fourth quarter, he really became unleashed."

"They just played better defense in the second half, and we weren't moving the ball," said Memphis coach John McVay, "and we had trouble stopping their sweeps. They kept turning the corner on us."

The Blazers took over on their own 28-yard line after Etter's miss, and marched 56 yards to the Memphis 16. But that threat fizzled when Strock missed a 36-yard field goal attempt. The Blazers had shown, however, that they were going to take the fight to Memphis. They just weren't going to quit.

Still, the 15 points Memphis had scored early on was holding up with 3:15 to play when Palazzo was sacked at his own 37, forcing a Blazer punt. With the way Memphis was capable of moving the football, they could conceivably just run out the clock with a first down or two. Dave Strock boomed his punt into the rain, and Dave Thomas waited at his own 23. With the rain affecting both visibility and ball handling, Thomas might have been better advised to let the ball go. But he decided to catch it. The wet ball slid right through his hands, and hit the turf. Luther Palmer gathered it in for the Blazers at the 23-yard line.

"It was very wet," said Thomas, "I was putting it into my arms, and I lost the grip."

Four plays later, as the 9,692 Memphis fans in Memorial Stadium watched in stunned silence, Richard James swept around right end from 4 yards out to put the Blazers up 18-15.

"I raced to the corner," said James.

Thomas atoned somewhat for his fumble by intercepting Palazzo's action point try to keep the margin at three points. There was 1:13 left on the clock, and Memphis could still tie it with a field goal.

Huarte, who hit on 17 of 22 passes for 198 yards, drove the Southmen from the Memphis 43 to the Florida 24. With the team out of timeouts, Memphis' Wally Highsmith then faked to injury to stop the clock—this was a legal maneuver at the time—with seven seconds left in the game. Highsmith's performance gave Etter the chance to race onto the field and line up for a 40-yard field goal try to tie it and send the game into overtime.

The snap was true, and Etter stepped into the ball. But Louis Ross, who had started the season in Toronto instead of Orlando due to a court order, and was wearing a shabby jersey with holes the team couldn't afford to repair, burst in, raised his arms and blocked the kick as the gun sounded. Ross raced down the field celebrating. The penniless but persistent Blazers had done it again. They had pulled an incredible upset to defeat what many considered the best team in the league, 18-15.

"We beat Memphis, the World Football League and the refs here tonight," said Larry Ely, "We beat their money."

"This is one of the few times in history," exclaimed Hubie Bryant, "that anyone's beat the system."

"We messed up the entire WFL," said Bob Davis, nursing his bruised ribs, "They've been trying to get rid of us all season but they can't."

"We came here to play despite the WFL setting it up for Memphis and Birmingham to make the finals," Tommy Reamon, who gained 125 yards, proclaimed, "We got mad about that. They set it up for the money teams but we spoiled it.

"We won our division but still had to play Philadelphia, a team with a losing record, to qualify to play Memphis. That was wrong. But we knew we could beat Memphis, and we did it."

"We're God's disciples," exhorted A.D. Whitfield, "We're here for a mission."

"We overcame two things," said running back Richard James, "We had to beat a great team, and we've had to overcome our individual problems. But getting money is now irrelevant. We just want the opportunity to play football. If we don't get paid, so what, we just want to go on and win that World Bowl."

"I feel mighty fine," said Luther Palmer, "Tell the world, I'm king of the specialty teams!"

Palazzo, the unlikely hero, said, "I just wanted to do well because I had a lot to prove to some people and to myself. This team has come too far to let them down. Our team ought to be an inspiration to any kid playing football anywhere."

Asked if this was his biggest moment in football, Palazzo answered, "This is my *only* moment."

"We had to regroup in the second half and we did," said Pardee, "We didn't panic. We just got in there and regrouped. A 15-point deficit was nothing to panic over. The game still had 30 minutes to go. Yes, I felt confident in Buddy. He hasn't had a lot of experience but he can play. I felt we could still win the game the way we set out to at the first of the week. Our game plan was to run at them and that's what we did. You've got to credit the players, for being like sponges. They just keep soaking up all the problems and performing. They're remarkable.

"That punt fumble was the turning point," the coach added.

"They blocked me, but I hardly felt it," beamed an ecstatic Ross, when asked about the blocked field goal, "I was wide open."

Ross told a television interviewer that he had prayed before the game, and that "my prayers were answered," he said, finally breaking down and weeping.

"It's the greatest feeling I've ever had," Ross added quietly, "God is with us. He's been with us all year. That's why we've stayed together."

Meanwhile, Memphis was faced with questions after finishing with the best record in the league and losing their first playoff game.

"We'll face ourselves in the mirror tomorrow," said John McVay, "We gave this franchise and this city the best we had to give."

"We didn't play as well as we should have," stated J.J. Jennings, "We made some costly mistakes, a fumble, and not picking up a late first down when we needed to."

"It's hard to believe," said offensive line coach Jay Fry, "We started out like a house afire . . ."

The World Bowl was now set: the Blazers against Birmingham. After all the problems, all the hassles, all the negative publicity, the WFL season was finally going to be decided on the field. But the World Bowl didn't seem like much of a prize.

Future "Pardon The Interruption" host Tony Kornheiser put it best when he wrote in *Sport* magazine: "The winners of the World Bowl would get car fare home; the losers would be walking."

CHAPTER 18

World Bowl I . . . and Only

The World Bowl

"Billie Hayes got that ball and ran with it. All our guys were running downfield blocking for him, knocking guys down after the game . . . and there is Billie running with that darn game ball."

—JACK PARDEE, head coach Florida Blazers

The World Bowl Championship Game was supposed to be the crown jewel of the WFL's inaugural season. But because of problems both on and off the field, that crown jewel began to take on the look of a dunce cap.

Originally scheduled to take place the Friday after Thanksgiving in Jacksonville's Gator Bowl as the culmination of a four-team tournament, the World Bowl was to cap the first successful season of a league that founder and now ex-commissioner Gary Davidson said would one day "encompass the entire planet."

"We are pleased to be able to announce Jacksonville as the site of our first championship game," Davidson had crowed proudly, "The response of the fans in the Jacksonville area to the WFL has been tremendous and we are certain that they will do an outstanding job in hosting our first title game."

But as the season progressed, it seemed every team in the league experienced some sort of financial hardship. That held true in Jacksonville, the proposed site of the World Bowl. The response of the fans in the Jacksonville area to the WFL had been far less than "tremendous." In fact, they treated the league with the same distaste that they held for a snowstorm, or dirt in their swimming pools. In short, they didn't like it, and by the middle of September attendance had dropped off so badly that the league folded the team and deserted the city. Even the Wiffle, which made some highly and incredibly questionable decisions in 1974, wasn't foolish enough to hold their championship game in a city where a team had gone out of business. The league instead decided to hold its first championship game in Birmingham.

So now, after the playoff rounds, the World Bowl was set—Florida at Birmingham. The Americans were favored, but the Blazers were the sentimental favorites because of what Joe Marshall in *Sports Illustrated* called "greater deprivation."

"We're playing on pure pride," said Blazer coach Jack Pardee, "We want to play now and become world champions. We've had a lot of fun, but football is fun only if you're winning."

"We're so angry that we want to win the World Bowl even if we have to eat crackers," said Florida quarterback Buddy Palazzo, "We're supposed to be playing for a living and we're not getting paid."

Palazzo may not have been so far off. Rumors circulated that the Blazers' pre-game meal consisted of water and biscuits.

The week before the game could hardly be confused with "Super Bowl Week." There was no Media Day, no analysis, no photo ops, and no talking heads predicting a winner. There was no media circus, just a circus!

"We went into the game without having been paid for our last 13 games," Blazer quarterback Bob Davis, recalled recently. "I remember Birmingham wasn't even sure if it was going to play a few days before the game. We weren't even sure there was going to be a game. And then, when it was over, the IRS confiscated their uniforms.

"By the time we went into the title game, we had forgotten about the money," Davis added, "The World Bowl became important because we had gone through so much together."

The Americans actually seemed to be jealous of all the attention the destitute Blazers were getting. They

hadn't been paid in five weeks and finally on Monday the 2nd, the team refused to practice and hinted that they might not play the game on Thursday.

"They're not hurting me, or the staff, or Bill Putnam," said Jack Gotta, "They're hurting themselves. And football. They're crucifying football, and no player comes out unscathed who tries to crucify football."

"I had nothing to do with it," responded Alan Miller, lawyer for the WFL Players' Association, when asked about the threatened boycott, "I don't know what the players have in mind, but if it's a power play, I think it is stupid, ill-advised and improper.

"I know one thing," Miller added, "If the players decide not to play the World Bowl, it would be the last straw for the World Football League."

However, the team held a team meeting on Tuesday. They took a vote, and then announced that they would play in the World Bowl. Americans' player rep Charley Harraway said the meeting got pretty "heated."

"A couple of guys got up and wanted to fight," said Harraway, "I don't know if we're going to have 100 percent of our players but we'll have enough to play." He added that the players were "quite disenchanted."

"We're just as mean and hungry as they are," said linebacker Ross Brupbacher, "If both teams are out for vengeance, let's get it on."

"We're going to play this one for our fans," said Harraway, "We're going to play because people here in Birmingham want a champion.

"We're about five game checks behind," added Harraway, "We have stuck together through more adverse conditions than Florida. We have had some coaching problems."

When asked to elaborate, Harraway indicated that while Jack Pardee had taken the side of the players when the Blazers had financial problems, "Jack Gotta has never done that with us," he said.

In an attempt to pay back all the debts and to allow the World Bowl to be played, the teams had negotiated a deal with creditors to accept a portion of the gate receipts. After paying fixed costs associated with the game, the IRS and others due money would split 30 percent of the revenue with the teams receiving the remaining 70 percent to pay long-overdue player salaries. This revenue was split by the Americans and Blazers on a 60/40 basis with the World Bowl winners receiving the larger share.

"I understand that will be only a few hundred dollars per man," said Harraway.

By late Thursday afternoon, only 25,000 tickets had been sold, and, unfortunately, many of those that had been sold were the $3 end zone tickets instead of the $9 sideline ducats.

As had become almost second nature with them, the Blazers experienced their share of difficulties and lack of respect.

Jack Pardee's wife, Phyllis, wanted to travel to Birmingham to attend the World Bowl game but the airline wouldn't approve their credit card. Only a registered check as a gift from her sister saved the day. But when Phyllis called an airline to make reservations, "they wouldn't take our check," Jack Pardee said, "They said to bring cash. . . . We put the registered check in the bank, but they wouldn't take a check on that either. Finally, Phyllis had to talk an officer of the bank into getting the money to pay the airline in cash."

The night before the game, to add insult to insult, Mrs. Pardee had $75, plus the keys to her car and a string of rosary beads her children had made for her all stolen.

Even league executives had their problems. Don Andersen, the Wiffle's vice president of Public Relations, recalled, "When I went down to Birmingham for the first and only World Bowl, I went on a one-way ticket. They didn't have the money for round trip. I got back home on my credit card."

Andersen then had to purchase the World Bowl trophy in a Birmingham hardware store, two days before the game. "We ended up with a nice trophy," Andersen remembered with a laugh, "but it certainly wasn't the Lombardi Trophy."

Birmingham had beaten Florida twice during the season, but that didn't faze the Blazers, who had become a walking, talking definition of the word "underdog."

"I think we can beat Birmingham," said Pardee, "But it should be a close game. I definitely feel somebody's looking after us. The players believe that, too."

"I believe we'll win the game, there's no doubt about that," said linebacker Larry Grantham, "I don't think there's any team in the WFL that can beat us three times. Memphis couldn't and I don't think Birmingham can."

"Now we've got to go out and prove ourselves all over again," Pardee added.

The lack of respect the Blazers had endured all season was in evidence before the World Bowl. "It was absurd," said defensive captain Paul Vellano, who would miss the game due to the broken left arm he suffered against Memphis, "Here is the World Bowl souvenir program and except for our name on the cover and the roster, you wouldn't know who Birmingham

was playing because they had everything set up for Memphis and we knocked them out. They had all their [*Birmingham's*] players' pictures in it but they didn't have ours. The players pretty much felt that the whole league was working for Memphis and Birmingham to be in the World Bowl."

But the Blazers had crashed the party. They had surprised their fans, the league, and their opponents, everyone it seemed except for themselves.

The Americans continued to have problems of their own. On Thursday the team was informed that because they owed on back taxes, sheriff's deputies had been ordered to confiscate all the teams' equipment after the game. Before the game, Jack Gotta reportedly paid for the team's pregame meal out of his own pocket.

When the players took the field, the 72,000-seat Legion Field wasn't even half full. Attendance was announced as 32,376 fans, and what was worse, most of those sat up in the cheaper seats.

The evening was clear and chilly with temperatures around 40 degrees. Florida won the toss and elected to receive. The Blazers promptly drove 51 yards, all of it on the ground, as Jim Strong and Tommy Reamon took turns hammering away at the Birmingham defense. Reamon ripped off a run of 24 yards to the Americans' 29-yard line. Finally, on a second down and one from the Birmingham five, Reamon started around right end and dove for the end zone. The ball popped loose and rolled out of the end zone for a touchback. Florida argued that Reamon had crossed the goal line before fumbling and it should have been a touchdown. But the officials ruled that he had fumbled before crossing the goal line and it was a touchback. Replays later revealed that Reamon had indeed scored.

"As I crossed the goal line," Reamon recalled in his book *Rough Diamonds*, "I was hit, and as I fell, the ball dropped to the ground and rolled out of the end zone. The television replay confirmed that I scored, but the officials ruled it a touchback."

"We were on the five yard line," remembered Matt Maslowski, "and when Tommy crossed the goal line that's where the collision took place and the ball came out and shot to the back of the end zone. As I dove for the ball, a Birmingham player kicked it out of the back of the end zone—the ball just grazed the tips of my fingers."

"Tommy had run a sweep," said linebacker Larry Ely, "and he dove over the goal line, got hit and the ball shot out. It was clear that he was over the plane of the goal line but the officials ruled against us. Back in '74, the ground could cause a fumble; you had to hold onto it. I remember thinking that he was over he was clearly over. It was a bad call."

"The officiating is worse than not getting paid," snarled Blazer linebacker Billy Hobbs.

"Reamon was in the end zone when he fumbled," said tight end Luther Palmer, "The officials took the touchdown and the game away from us. This was the worst job we have ever got."

That was the closest either team came to scoring in the first quarter. But near the end of the quarter, Willie Smith intercepted a Bob Davis pass intended for Greg Latta. The Americans then moved 58 yards in 15 plays. George Mira hit Dennis Homan for 17 yards, Alfred Jenkins for 18 and tight end Bob Brown for 17 more, and then Joe Profit scored from the one to cap the drive. Mira's pass for the action point fell incomplete, but Birmingham still led, 7-0.

Florida took the kickoff and the running of Reamon and Richard James moved the Blazers into Americans' territory. On third down, however, Larry Estes and Bob Tatarek sacked Davis to end the drive.

Birmingham got the ball back and a 30-yard run by Art Cantrelle set up the Americans in business again. Joe Profit gained 15 yards on two straight carries, and two offsides penalties on Florida moved the ball in close enough for Cantrelle to finish off the 66 yard march with a 4-yard run. Back-up quarterback Matthew Reed kept the ball on the action point try and scored to make it 15-0.

At halftime, the league announced that three players—Tony Adams of Southern California, J.J. Jennings of Memphis, and Tommy Reamon of Florida—had been named WFL co-MVPs. "All the writers voted," Don Andersen recalled, "and there was a three-way tie for the thing." They would split the $10,000 prize money, which Andersen said he came up with thanks to a deal with a local dairy. But instead of a giant Ed McMahon-sized check, an armored car drove right onto Legion Field and armed guards neatly stacked the cash high on a table in the middle of the field. Each player received a bag containing $3,333 in cold cash.

"In those days, people wouldn't believe a WFL check was good for anything," said Andersen, "So we had to pay them in cash. So there we were, with a Brinks truck at midfield on national television, paying our three MVPs $3,333 apiece. In cash."

When he was asked beforehand what he would do with the cash, Reamon quipped, "I'll let you know when I see it."

Tony Adams even got a little extra bonus, as he received a kiss from Miss Florida, who was none other than future actress and *Designing Woman* Delta Burke.

Birmingham received the second half kickoff and started flexing its muscles. Joe Profit gained 24 yards and George Mira 19, and then Mira ended the 74-yard march with a 26-yard scoring pass to Bob Brown. Reed's action point pass for Jenkins fell incomplete, but the Americans now led, 22-0, with 9:11 left in the third quarter.

"We really thought we were going to run away with it," Mira recalled, "We put 22 points on the board, bang, bang, bang. We said, 'Jesus we can do whatever we want to.'"

Right then and there, the Blazers could have packed it in. They trailed by 22 points with only a quarter and a half left in the game. Their quarterback had yet to complete a single pass. As Joe Marshall wrote in *Sports illustrated*, "If the Blazers had accepted their fate, had quickly run out the last 15 minutes of a three-month nightmare, and had gone off in search of gainful employment, who could have blamed them?"

Who indeed? But these Blazers never seemed too willing to accept their fate.

"They made some changes that hurt us and stopped some of the things we wanted to do," said Mira, "They got a little more aggressive. Blitzed more, and stopped the running game. When the defense blitzes, they fill the gaps and the running game is headed for those gaps. The Blazers put a lot of heat on me when I dropped back to pass. I think we scored so easy that we sat back and said, 'No problem.' Hell, it soon became a problem!"

That's because the Blazers simply refused to die.

After a pair of sacks ended one drive and another was stopped by an interception, the Blazers took over on their own 12-yard line with 1:52 left in the third quarter. Who knows what thoughts were going through the minds of those 11 men as they stood 88 yards from the end zone on a cold night in Birmingham? Whatever those thoughts were, they didn't include surrender.

As the Blazers huddled, Bob Davis knelt on one knee and looked up at each of his teammates. The frustrations of the long season and the game had taken its toll, and the players were grumbling amongst themselves.

"Shut up! Shut up!" Davis yelled, "We can still win this football game! We have to play our game. We can't go back."

On first down, Davis dropped back and finally completed his first pass, a 13-yard gain to Hubie Bryant. "No, the World Bowl was not my greatest game," admitted Davis later.

Two plays later, a screen pass to Jim Strong ate up 21 more yards. Another toss to Strong advanced the ball 15 more. On the first play of the last quarter, Davis lobbed a pass to Reamon, who caught the ball on the 15 and carried it all the way to the end zone. The action point pass from Davis to Matt Maslowski was batted away, but Florida had cut the deficit to 22-7.

Florida held Birmingham, but the Blazers next drive ended when Davis threw four straight incompletions. Birmingham went "three and out," and Florida took over on its own 27. On third and nine, Davis scrambled for 12 yards and a first down. Gerard Williams broke up a Davis to Eddie Richardson pass, and then Florida was penalized for holding. Reamon could only manage a yard. But on second-and-19, Davis whipped a pass to Bryant for 28 yards and a first down at the Birmingham 40. On the very next play, Davis scrambled away from a heavy pass rush by the Americans, spied Latta down the right sideline, and threw the ball to the tight end. The rookie receiver raced down the sideline to complete the play and the touchdown. Clifford McClain was stopped on the action point try, but with 5:40 left in the game, the Birmingham lead was down to 22-14.

Dave Strock kicked the ball deep and the Florida defense stopped the Americans on three straight plays. Earl Sark got off a good punt, but Rod Foster gathered it in at his own 24 and started running. "Somebody knock him the hell down!" Mira recalled thinking on the sidelines. But no one did. Foster stunned the Americans and the crowd on hand by breaking no less than five tackles and racing 76 yards for an electrifying return for a touchdown.

With 4:14 still left in the game, Florida had now drawn to within one point of the Americans, 22-21.

"There wasn't any panic on our part," recalled Mira, "I was thinking, 'If they score, we'll have to do this and this.' The offense got together and planned out what we would do if Florida punched it in. That's the mark of a championship team, when you don't get all panicked and excited about things."

The action point would tie it, and the Blazers went to the one man they had gone to all year. When they needed a yard or a first down or a big play, the Blazers had turned to Tommy Reamon. Sure enough, on the action point, Davis gave it to Reamon, who tried to go around right end. But Larry Estes, Warren Capone, and Randy Lee broke through and smothered Reamon. Florida still trailed by one.

But with a little over four minutes left, the never-say-die Blazers, who had won seven games with fourth-quarter comebacks, figured there was still plenty of time remaining for another miracle finish.

Strock tried an on-sides kick, but the ball bounced out of bounds. The second try went right to Birmingham's Jimmy Edwards, who held on. The Americans got one first down, then faced a third and nine at the two-minute warning. Matthew Reed, in for Mira at quarterback because of his mobility, dropped back, avoided the rush and rumbled 12 yards for a first down, dragging seemingly the entire Blazer defense with him.

Birmingham had another third and long with a minute and a half left, but Charlie Harraway drove around right end for 10 yards and a first down to the Florida 12. John Ricca tackled Harraway, and the two started to tangle as Ricca tried to grab the ball away from Harraway. Because of the scuffle, Ricca was thrown out of the game.

As he left the field, Ricca flipped off the cheering Birmingham fans. But he wasn't just giving the finger to the Americans' fans. He was giving the bird to the WFL, the world and the fates themselves, who had finally turned their back on Florida.

The frustrated Blazers, out of time outs, could only watch as the clock ticked off the final seconds. On each play, the Blazers would try to strip the football from the ball carrier, and their overanxious play would cause another scuffle. Birmingham's Jimmy Edwards was also kicked out of the game.

Then, when the gun sounded, Florida's Billie Hayes grabbed the football and headed toward the Blazer locker room.

"Billie Hayes ran up at the end of the game and grabbed the ball and took off with it," said Matt Maslowski, "We were all thinking 'He's crazy!' Billie took off and ran with it."

"Billie Hayes got that ball and ran with it," added Jack Pardee, "All our guys were running downfield blocking for him, knocking guys down after the game . . . and there is Billie running with that darn game ball."

A group of Americans, led by tackle Paul Costa, chased Hayes and a shoving match ensued under the stands. The Blazers managed to get the ball into their locker room—"Either Larry Ely or Billy Hobbs ended up with the ball," said Pardee—where Pardee's son, Steve, awarded his father the game ball.

The Blazers got no respect in the Legion Field stands, on the sidelines, or even in their own locker room, that evening. A drunk in the stands harassed Pardee's six-year-old son Teddy, and a visibly angry Phyllis Pardee had to be escorted by police out of the stands after the game. Buddy Palazzo recalled almost getting killed by Birmingham fans throwing ice chunks at the Florida sideline.

In the Blazers' locker room, an angry Birmingham fan charged at Pardee with a switchblade and it took several Blazers' players to disarm the assailant.

"You just don't blow calls like that," said Billy Hobbs, still seething about the officials disallowing Reamon's touchdown, "The officiating is the worst part of the WFL. These were the same officials we had during our final game in Southern California and they're the worst crew in the league."

"We played as hard as we could," said Larry Ely, "Birmingham got a few first downs at the end, we couldn't stop them, and they earned it."

Jack Pardee indicated that the weeks of frustration were worth it, although he was disappointed that the players didn't get paid what they should have for the World Bowl game.

"I thought the players would get something, perhaps $3,000 or $4,000 each," recalled Pardee, "but the courts came in and took all the proceeds from the game. The WFL gave us enough money to get back to Florida. In the end, the players got $150 each to get back home. There were questions about the gate receipts from that game. Our players pretty well got screwed on that too."

"The players put so much into it—their hearts and souls," Pardee remembered, "It was sad after all that work, being committed to each other, not winning a game we should have won. I went around, one on one, to the players and wished them happy holidays and making sure guys could get home."

In the Americans locker room, linebacker Ross Brupbacher, speaking for the whole team, said, "The game ball goes to the city of Birmingham. I hope they bring us back here next year to play with it."

"I've waited 11 years to be a starter on a world championship team," said George Mira, "We feel we are champions.

"We were fortunate. We didn't make a lot of mistakes, and we made things go our way."

"I don't know what happens tomorrow," said Jack Gotta, "Tonight is the greatest night in my life."

After the game, Jefferson County Sheriff's Department deputies moved right into the locker room to repossess the uniforms as soon as the champions took them off. That's because Hibbett Sporting Goods, which had provided the uniforms and football equipment to the franchise, had still not been paid the $38,800 owed to them by the end of the season.

Putnam shrugged and said, "So what, they're just uniforms."

Some of his players did not agree. In an attempt to retain mementos from the game, a few of the Americans players smuggled their uniforms and

helmets out the front door while others passed theirs out the windows to waiting family members.

One week later, Hibbett Sporting Goods began selling the reclaimed gear as souvenirs and Christmas presents in their retail stores.

The Blazers traveled home pondering their future and the status of not only the team but also the WFL itself.

"We figured after the World Bowl that the World Football League was done," Matt Maslowski said, "When we got back to Orlando, guys were taking their uniforms and equipment and running off with it."

"When we got back from Birmingham after the World Bowl," Pardee recalled, "a judge called me and told me to get down to the offices and get any personal items out because they were going down to padlock the doors. I knew it was over then."

"We played in the championship game that year, and I think I came up with $240 for being in the whole playoffs," defensive coach Ray Callahan said. "I'd get up and go to work and not even think about it. The talent couldn't compare with the NFL, but we had a bunch of guys who really loved to play."

"It was sad to go back to Orlando," remembered Larry Ely, "You knew that it was over, that the team would never be together again. Saying goodbye to those guys was the hardest thing ever because we had been through so much as a team. We knew the team was done. When we got back to Florida, the equipment was going to be repossessed and the grounds were going to be locked up."

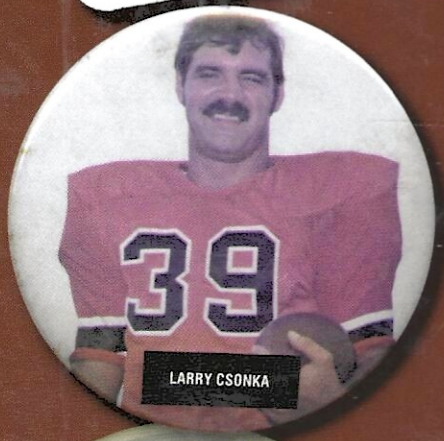
Davis remembered how players had to scramble to make ends meet after the game. "I had to let seven or eight guys pay for their airfare home on my credit card," Davis said. "Surprisingly, all of them paid me back."

Jack Pardee laughed when asked if he would have come back as a head coach in the WFL in 1975.

"I had had all the fun I could take," Pardee said with a wry smile.

The decade of the 1970s was a unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting decade all at the same time. It was a turbulent time that saw many history-making events, and some wild and crazy fads and fashions come and go. A lot of things associated with the 1970s, like bell bottoms, leisure suits, Jimmy Hoffa, pet rocks, lava lamps, mood rings, Nehru jackets, disco music, and Richard Nixon, didn't survive that turbulent decade. Neither did the World Football League. Like the decade itself, the WFL was at once unique, fascinating, depressing and exciting. It was a slick, mod, hip alternative to an established entity, the National Football League. It featured the Dickerrod, King Corcoran, bouncing checks, yellow footballs, court orders, magenta and orange uniforms, color-coded pants, Papergate, and singular team nicknames that one scribe said made the WFL sound more like a listing of Indian folklore than a football league. But, also like the decade itself, while the league did not survive the 70s, the wild, zany and hilariously true stories associated with the WFL survive to this day. It has never ceased to amaze and entertain. As Alex Hawkins, color commentator for the WFL's Game of the Week broadcasts, so aptly said, "The whole thing was so bizarre, that you just had to love it."

All of these stories have been chronicled in "WIFFLE," a book that can be best described as a 50-yard line ticket to a real-life Theater of the Absurd.



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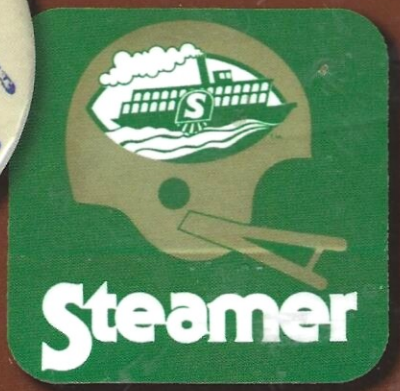

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